

Moral Obligations toward the Future

I. Introduction

Until now our ethical considerations have typically involved our interactions with people such as family members, fellow students, and fellow citizens—those who together might be called our **moral community**. Even when our considerations have encompassed the wider “community” of human beings, we have still limited our thinking to those presently living—to our *contemporaries*. The same can be said of most moral theories—which likewise tend to focus on the moral obligations of the living toward their contemporaries. This suggests an interesting question: Can we also have moral concerns and obligations involving those who do *not* belong to our contemporary moral community?

For instance, what about those who lived in the past? Although we cannot now affect any persons who are no longer alive, we can still affect some of their interests. Like ourselves, past people certainly had interests in their own human dignity, in what others thought of them, and in the welfare of their progeny. We thus appear to have moral obligations not to desecrate their graves, slander them, or take for ourselves what they willed to their offspring. Further, it seems that we can sometimes hold past persons morally blameworthy for the ways their actions have affected us. Consider a present-day man whose grandparents were gassed by the Nazis. Besides blaming the Nazis for what they did to his grandparents, doesn't this man also have a right to hold the Nazis responsible for *personally wronging him* by causing the untimely deaths of his grandparents? Doesn't the Native American who is destitute today because of policies carried out against her ancestors likewise have a personal moral claim against those past people whose actions led to her present condition? In fact, we take such moral judgments so seriously that reparations are sometimes made to people today for wrongs committed by past generations. Note that when such reparations are made, it is because *those past persons* committed the wrong, not because anyone today has wronged these present-day people. It thus does seem that we can have moral concerns and obligations involving people who lived in the past.

This raises an even more interesting question: Could *we* have moral obligations toward future people—toward those who have not yet come into existence? This question may be more important today than ever. As the world's population grows past the present 6.5 billion, it looks like we will soon run out of the resources needed to sustain so many people. Do we have a moral duty to limit our use of resources for the sake of future generations? Most scientists agree that our present dependency upon fossil fuels is warming the globe by as much as 4° F per century.¹ That may not seem like much, but the polar ice caps and glaciers around the world are already melting, and the global sea level appears to be rising at an alarming rate.² If these trends continue, the world's low-lying regions (including New York City) will ultimately be flooded over, tropical diseases will spread into today's temperate zones, and extensive droughts will curtail world food production. Meanwhile, today's industries are generating additional tons of pollutants that future generations will have to deal with. Although these trends may not have a very great impact upon *us*³, they are likely to have drastic effects upon people living just a couple of generations after us. Since we have some ability to alter or at least slow these trends, don't we have a moral obligation to act today for the sake of our future descendants?

¹ NOAA Public Affairs, “Global Warming May Be Accelerating,” *USA Today*, April 17, 2000, <http://www.usatoday.com/weather/news/2000/wgblwrm.htm> (accessed February 12, 2010).

² The sea appears to have risen three times faster over the past 100 years than over the previous 3,000 years. “Early Warning Signs of Global Warming: Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Flooding,” *Union of Concerned Scientists*, December 21, 2004, http://www.ucsusa.org/global_environment/global_warming/index.cfm (accessed February 12, 2010).

³ We cannot be sure about this, however; a recent study suggests that global warming has already increased the violence and power of hurricanes by as much as 50% since the 1970s.

Many people feel that we do have some moral obligations toward future generations. Although this is harder to establish than you might at first expect, it does seem that most of the relevant objections can be answered. Sketching several of these answers will be our primary goal for this chapter.

Summary: *Although our moral concerns usually involve our contemporaries, it would appear that we can have obligations toward—and make claims upon—people in the past. Intuitively, it also seems that we can have obligations toward future generations. This has important moral*

II. Duties toward Future Generations

To begin appreciating the problems raised by future generations—and to see how we might respond to these problems—let's first examine some objections to the claim that we *do* have moral obligations to future people. The first objection has probably already crossed your mind:

1. *Our moral duties can extend only to existing people.* Since future generations do not presently exist, it is not possible to have any moral obligations toward them.

There are many reasons to think this objection is mistaken. For one thing, it would also rule out any moral claims or responsibilities toward those in the past since past people do not *presently* exist any more than future people do! Yet, as we have already discussed, it certainly seems that we can have moral concerns involving people in the past. We have a moral duty to respect the dignity of past people, for instance, by not desecrating their graves. We owe this duty to a past individual even if no one living today has any particular interest in that past person.

Further, the present-day grandchild of a gassed Jewish couple and the destitute Native American can hold genuine moral claims against those particular *past people* who, by their actions, wronged those who presently live. Thus, if it is possible for people of past generations to have wronged present-day people, then those living in the past must have had moral obligations toward present-day people. But at the time those *past people* were living, it was *their* present, and the people they had obligations toward were people who had not yet come into existence. In short, they had obligations toward people who were *future* to them. In the same way, we can have moral obligations toward people who are future to us.

Here is a striking illustration. First, let us suppose that terrorists manage to launch a nuclear missile that kills millions of people in some country. By any defensible moral standard, the terrorists have wronged those innocent millions by utterly failing in their moral obligation to bring no harm upon them. In this case, of course, both the terrorists and those they have obligations toward are contemporaries. But let's now make one small change to the story. This time the terrorists launch a nuclear missile that is set to remain in orbit for two centuries; only then does it fall upon the country and kill the country's citizens. ". . . [As] in the former case, this must surely also be an infringement of these future victims' right to life. The fact that the missile hits its target two centuries after it was launched is morally irrelevant."⁴ Surely the terrorists have as much of an obligation not to harm people living two centuries later as they have not to harm people living today. After all, it certainly seems indefensible to say that although the killing of millions of contemporary people is wrong, there is nothing wrong with doing something today that will kill millions of people in the future.

So far we have utilized our moral intuitions to suggest how we can have moral obligations toward future people. A simple argument, however, can also be offered. First, let us take it for granted that there *will* be a future generation 200 years hence. Let's call those future people

⁴ Jen Saugstad, "Moral Responsibility towards Future Generations of People: Utilitarian and Kantian Ethics Compared." Lecture at University of Oslo, June 17, 1994, folk.uio.no/jenssa/Future%20Generations.htm (accessed February 12, 2010).

actual people: people who *do* exist in their time no less than we exist in ours. Being like us, future actual people will also have important personal interests—including interests that we have the power to affect by our choices. For example, if we continue our extravagant consumption of fossil fuels, these future people will face flooding in coastal areas, the spread of tropical diseases, and killing droughts. Many of their most important interests—including their health and survival—will be affected by our choices. But doesn't this confer upon us some sort of moral obligation not to act in ways that will harm these people's interests? That is, the following principle seems to hold:

Principle of Obligation: Whenever a person A's free action can significantly harm some person B or B's important interests, A has a *conditional moral duty*⁵ not to act in that way.

Because that is just the situation we find ourselves in with respect to actual future people, we thus can have moral obligations toward them.⁶

According to the objection we are considering, however, this principle ought to be qualified. In particular, some claim that there is no such Principle of Obligation between individuals belonging to distinct moral communities. To belong to the same moral community, furthermore, two individuals must have a rough sort of equality between them. Of course, there often *is* such an equality between people living as contemporaries—and since our everyday moral concerns involve our contemporaries, the Principle of Obligation naturally strikes us as reasonable. However (the objector maintains), our tendency to focus upon everyday situations misleads us for there can be no such equality between people living at different times. Because the difference in time puts present and future generations in different moral communities, neither has any moral obligation toward the other.

Let's see how this is supposed to work. In most everyday situations, any good or harm that one person can bring upon another can usually also be brought by the other upon the first. This gives them a certain sort of moral equality and so places them in the same moral community. More specifically, whenever one person can kill, injure, or invade the privacy of others, it is usually *possible*, at least, for the latter to do the same. Given our moral obligations not to do such things, it follows that, just as one individual has a moral obligation not to kill, injure, or invade the privacy of another, the latter has the same moral obligations toward the former.

Suppose, however, that two parties are *not* contemporaries. As we have seen, it is quite easy for us to affect future people's interests in health and survival, but it is impossible for future people to affect *our* interests in health or survival. Although it is true that future people can affect *some* of our interests (e.g., future people can desecrate our graves), it is clear that future people cannot have nearly the effect upon us that we can have upon them. Because of this difference, the objector maintains that present and future generations belong to distinct moral communities and so cannot have moral obligations toward each other. The Principle of Obligation thus does not place us under any moral obligations toward future people.

We have already encountered something like this with the ethics of caring. According to Noddings's version (see Chapter Twelve, Section VI), a caring encounter requires an interpersonal relationship in which each person can interact with the other. In particular, the cared-for needs to respond to the one caring in order to complete an act of caring. If it is not possible for the cared-for to communicate a response to the one caring, then there is no

⁵ Remember (from the discussion of Ross's ethics in Section II of Chapter Nine) that a *conditional moral duty* is one I ought to fulfill *if* there is no more important moral duty to override it.

⁶ Strictly, this argument is incomplete as stated, since it also seems to require the reasonable possibility of the agent *understanding how* her choices can affect the interests of the other. Thus, I can be morally responsible only if my free choice can affect another person's interests *and* I can be reasonably expected to anticipate the likely effects.

genuine relationship, no acts of caring are possible, and there can be no obligation to care. On this basis, notoriously, Noddings concludes that the average American has no obligation to care about the starving African child. More generally, there can be no moral obligations between people who are not roughly equal with respect to what care ethics counts as morally important—the ability to interact in ways appropriate to interpersonal relationships. But because no one in the future can interact with or respond to someone in the past, there can be no obligation for the present generation to care for the needs of future generations.

Clearly care ethics qualifies the Principle of Obligation in a way quite similar to what is called for by the objection under consideration. Yet, this very aspect of care ethics—and especially its conclusion regarding the starving African child—seems objectionable, for surely we *do* have at least a conditional moral duty to help the starving child—even if she is unable to respond back to us. Indeed, many insist that the more defenseless or vulnerable the child is in her lack of power to affect others, the *greater* the responsibility we have to come to her aid. If this is what the qualification about moral communities can lead us to, then we have good reason to reject that qualification.

It is also worth observing that several moral theories appear to set themselves against the proposed qualification. Act utilitarianism, for instance, builds an *unqualified* Principle of Obligation into its very formulation. According to act utilitarianism, remember, our one moral duty is to act so as to promote the greatest overall utility for those affected by our action. This duty holds regardless of whether or not those affected may also be able to affect us (i.e., whether or not they belong to the same “moral community”). Indeed, because utilitarian calculations include *long-term* effects, it is likely that people far removed from the present will still have to be included in the utilitarian calculation—even when those people are too far removed in time from us to be part of our moral community. In short, utilitarianism introduces no qualification regarding who should be included in the determination of our moral obligations. A little reflection should make it clear that rule utilitarianism (which employs similar sorts of long-range calculations) and natural law theory (which is concerned with our conforming to and preserving the natural order) likewise make their assignments of moral obligation without qualification.

In view of the preceding considerations, therefore, it appears appropriate to reject the first objection. The fact that future people do not presently exist does not (*in itself*) count against our having obligations toward them. Nor does it matter that present and future generations are unequal in their abilities to affect each other and so belong to different moral communities.⁷

Suppose next that our actions today would ultimately make it impossible for humanity to survive at some future time. Do we have any responsibility to avoid causing this catastrophic effect? Some say we do not:

2. *There can be no moral obligation to ensure the future of humanity.* We do no moral wrong if, by our present actions, we make it impossible for future generations to exist because there would then be no future person whom we could have wronged.

This is probably our most challenging objection. For one thing, it contains an important element of truth. Consider the following: A newly married man and woman decide that they do not want to have children for several years, and their use of birth control turns out to be completely successful. But let us also suppose that, if they *had not* used birth control, they would now have two children. Their actions, therefore, have kept those two children from coming into existence (I assume that, no matter how many children this couple—or anyone else—ever has, neither of *these* two children could otherwise ever come into existence). Has this

⁷ This idea of drawing lines between different moral communities also has a dangerous resemblance to certain aspects of relativism—and is susceptible to many of the same criticisms.

couple committed any wrong against these two children by denying them even the possibility of coming into existence?⁸

Assuming the question to be coherent, it seems that no wrong has been committed. Although it is possible to wrong actual persons, it is not possible to wrong **merely possible people**—people who *could* come into existence but who never actually do, remaining forever non-actual. The couple thus has no moral obligation toward these two children. More generally, it does not seem possible to have any moral obligations toward any merely possible but non-actual persons—whether we imagine them living in the past, present, or future. Moral obligations are limited to actual persons (including actual future persons)—which is why, until now, we have assumed that future persons actually will exist. With this assumption, we have argued that we do have moral obligations toward actual future persons. But take away any actual future persons, and there is no one left toward whom we can have any obligations.

Let us now expand upon this example. Suppose that, like this couple, *everyone* on Earth agrees to stop having children—and also agrees to never have any children again. If the measures they take are 100% effective, then there will soon be no possibility of any future generations. Would there be any moral wrong in all of this?

Once again, it does not seem that there is any wrong committed against any of the future people who would otherwise have existed. Like the couple's two children, no members of any future generations will ever become actual. Accordingly, there never will be any actual future people who can be harmed by our denying those people an existence. (Nor, of course, are we somehow cutting short their existence in any way.) We can have no moral obligations toward such non-actual persons. Having said this, however, we must not be so hasty as to conclude that no moral obligation *of any sort* has therefore been violated. There might still be a moral obligation to ensure the existence of future generations.

There are two general ways by which such an obligation might arise. One possibility is that there might simply *be* certain moral obligations, not directed toward anyone in particular. Alternately, our obligation to ensure the existence of future generations might still be directed toward specific persons. Let us take each of these in turn.

Several reasons can be advanced for thinking that we have a moral obligation to ensure the existence of future generations, even if these obligations are to no one in particular. For instance, it may be that we have an obligation to preserve the human race simply because our race itself has *fundamental value*—distinct from the value of those who make it up. After all, although it might be undesirable for, say, a dolphin or a bird or a particular tree to die, it is much worse, many people feel, for *all* the dolphins, or an entire species of bird or tree, to die out, becoming forever irreplaceable. Species seem to have value in themselves—and their value is not simply because they play an important role in the ecosystem or because humans find them useful. But if this can be said of other species, then it can likewise be said for the human species. Being a thing of intrinsic value, furthermore, we have a (*conditional*) moral obligation to preserve it from extinction.

One basis for thinking along these lines is furnished by natural law theory. According to natural law, our fundamental moral obligation is to uphold and conform to the natural order. This in turn generates obligations to preserve life, to procreate, to maintain that which contributes to overall health, to maintain the natural ecological balance—roughly, to do all that preserves the natural status quo. An attraction of this view is that it captures our deep intuition that life itself is a good thing; as such, it provides a basis for our obligation to

⁸ Note that this case does not address the question of killing or harming any children who have already started existence (e.g., by abortion); rather, we are considering two only merely possible but never actual children.

preserve *all* aspects of the natural world, not just the human species. Yet, although natural law yields obligations to ensure future life in general, these obligations are not directed *toward* anyone in particular.

Finally, it has been maintained that utilitarianism entails an obligation to ensure the existence of future generations. The idea is that we have a fundamental obligation to maximize happiness, and that includes future happiness. However, if no future people exist, there can be no one experiencing any happiness; to maximize happiness, therefore, we must ensure the existence of people.⁹

Let's now turn to the idea that our obligation to the future is an obligation toward specific persons. One view of this sort would be that of Divine Command theorists (see Chapter Thirteen) who often hold that God commands us not to act in any way that could put an end to the human race since human existence is God's prerogative alone. (On the positive side, Genesis also includes the command to "be fruitful and multiply.") According to Divine Command Theory, then, our obligation regarding future generations is an *obligation to God*.

There may also be an *obligation to presently living people* to ensure the existence of future generations. Although we earlier imagined the possibility of everyone agreeing to stop producing children, it is nevertheless the case that human beings have a strong instinctive interest in producing, caring for, and assuring the well-being of their own children. In addition, because members of the next generation will care deeply about the happiness of *their* children, members of the present generation will usually care about what their children care about. Many people also have a strong desire that their family line continue. Because people do have such interests, we have a conditional obligation toward many present people not to obstruct these interests.

More generally, nearly all people have strong interests in the continuation of human activity. Through a great many of our projects, plans, hopes, and expenditures of effort, we invest ourselves in future generations. Artists want their works to live on; political leaders want to establish just and stable governments; scientists strive to contribute to our accumulation of knowledge; educators seek to prepare young people for their roles in human affairs; business people seek to innovate valuable products and services. In countless ways, human beings invest themselves in the future and so establish strong personal interests in the future fruits of those efforts. To put an end to the human race would be to affront those interests, diminish those efforts, and even devalue the people making those efforts. We thus have an obligation to ensure future generations, and this is an obligation that we have to both past and present generations.

Summary: *We have considered two objections to our having moral obligations toward actual future people (those who actually will exist, as opposed to those who are merely possible). (1) The first claims that we cannot have any obligations toward people who do not presently exist. However*

III. Some Further Objections**

Utilitarianism runs into a serious problem in dealing with future generations. This is a general problem with justice. The problem depends on how we define happiness. (a) Suppose that we simply maximize the total amount of happiness. Suppose that we simply maximize the total amount of happiness in future lives contain at least a little more happiness than unhappiness, we would be building a huge population of barely happy people really be a good thing. (b) Suppose we promote the greatest average happiness (total happiness divided by the number of people). The problem here is that, if we do this in the way that best promotes happiness, we have to act in a highly discriminatory manner. In particular, the most effective way to increase average happiness would be to reduce the numbers of those kinds of people who tend to be least happy while increasing the numbers of those kinds of people who tend to be most happy. In purely practical, contemporary terms, this would probably require that we target Third World poor for population reduction while also attempting to increase the populations in the already affluent West. But this would obviously be unacceptably discriminatory toward most of the world's races and cultures.

Having laid aside the preceding two objections, we now must turn to a couple of related but more subtle difficulties.

3. *Although we can have moral obligations to definite individuals, we cannot have any moral obligations to undetermined persons.* But because no future human being's particular individuality has yet been uniquely determined, there are no *definite* individuals who can yet be said to exist in the future. We thus can have no moral duties toward any future people.¹⁰

The gist of this objection seems to be that one cannot have a moral obligation as long as the object of that obligation remains indefinite and undetermined. Rather, moral obligations can exist only toward **definite individuals**—unique, actual individuals who exist at some point in time. On this view, moral obligations work like interpersonal relationships: One simply cannot have a real interpersonal relationship if that relationship is with no particular person. But is this really true of moral obligations?

There seem to be several possible mistakes or confusions underlying this objection. For instance, one might take it to be implying that if I do not presently *know* with whom I will be dealing in a given situation, I cannot have any moral obligations toward that person. But this is false. Even if I do not know who is enrolled in my new class until the day the students walk into the classroom, I still have an obligation, beforehand, to think and speak of them respectfully, to not set booby traps in the classroom that could injure them, etc. Even more absurd is the interpretation that, until I come to know of a person, that person cannot *be* any definite person. Quite independently of *my* knowledge, that person will continue to be the one definite individual she has always been. My coming to know of someone cannot make the other person more definite; the only things it can make more definite are my own thoughts about that person.

More subtly, we might interpret the objection as implying that until the relevant factors determine who the persons living 200 years from now will be, there can be no definite individuals of that time toward whom we can presently refer to or have obligations. But even this line of thinking is mistaken. As long as we assume that *there will be* such people, then, necessarily, each one of those future persons will be some definite individual. There are no such things as shadowy, non-definite people—in the future or anywhere else! Consider the U.S. woman who will be the first to give birth on New Year's Day 2206. Assuming that there will be such a woman, note that few of the factors that will determine *who*, in particular, that woman will be are *presently* settled. Nevertheless, those factors *will* inevitably get settled in exactly one particular way, and that particular woman will, necessarily, be the unique individual determined by those factors. Although we don't presently know much about this woman, we are still able to uniquely "pick her out" by describing her as the "woman who will be the first to give birth" on that day. That distinguishes her from every other person existing at that time. She will always have been that one definite and unique individual. To claim otherwise is simply mistaken.¹¹

If we can refer to presently undetermined persons, we can place ourselves in moral obligations toward such persons as well. Consider a typical state lottery, in which the state sells lottery tickets and then randomly selects the winner's number (for simplicity, suppose that each ticket is owned by just *one* person and that the one winning ticket is always cashed in). At the start,

** Double-asterisked sections are optional and tend to be more difficult.

¹⁰ Here, an (actual) future human being is someone who will come into existence in the future but who does not presently exist. To simplify our considerations, we will assume that coming into existence occurs at the moment an individual is uniquely and definitely determined. Thus, future persons would include all those who have not yet been conceived.

¹¹ This argument turns on a widely held theory of time that some nevertheless do not accept. The reasons for accepting this theory lead to a fascinating discussion in metaphysics, but cannot be taken up here.

the state places itself under obligation to run the game fairly, to ensure the existence of a winning ticket, to pay the prize money to the holder of the winning ticket, etc. These obligations, arguably, extend to *all* players, even though the actual players are not fully determined at the start of the game. Further, these obligations clearly include the as-yet-undetermined winner. In this way, then, the state places itself under a moral obligation to an undetermined person. Nor would it make any difference if the game were run over a much longer period of time, so that at the start of the game some future ticket holders may not have even been born. In the past, the U.S. government issued paper money (the old “silver certificates”) as promissory notes to *the holder* to pay that person the bill’s face value in silver upon demand—even though the holder who might demand payment at some particular time was not yet determined and even might not yet have existed.

There are many more illustrations of moral obligations toward presently undetermined people. For instance, the terrorists had no idea who would be victimized in the World Trade Towers on 9/11—nor had the complex factors of that day even completely determined who these victims would be until the towers began to collapse. Yet, the terrorists still had a moral obligation not to harm those people. Similarly, the mugger lurking in the shadows has an obligation not to mug whoever might next happen to walk by. Yet again, the CEO has a responsibility not to bilk thousands of investors out of their money, even though the actual set of bilked investors may not be determined at the time the CEO acts. Finally, those launching the nuclear missile 200 years before impact break their moral obligation toward their future victims, even though none of those people exists at the time of the launch. Especially where matters of justice are involved, we can have important moral obligations toward undetermined sets of people.

Several ethical theories concur. According to utilitarianism, for instance, the essence of our moral responsibility is to bring about the maximal overall utility—the persons actually being affected make no difference. Nor does natural law theory care *which persons*, in particular, we do not kill, or lie to, or injure—because killing, lying to, or injuring *any* human being violates the natural law. But if the precise individuals involved make no difference to these theories, then neither can it make any difference if some or all of those involved remain undetermined at the time of the action in question.

Although these theories seem supportive of our position, some claim that Kantian theory can make no sense of duties toward undetermined persons. For instance, Kantian duties involve one’s intentions, and it may seem hard to have intentions directed toward no specific person. The problem may become yet clearer when we consider Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, which tells us to treat all persons affected by our actions as ends, never as means only. But how is it possible to *treat* an indefinite or undetermined person as either a means or an end?

Although these questions may seem perplexing at first, it is not so clear that Kantian ethics can make no sense of, say, treating undetermined persons in certain ways or of having intentions toward undetermined persons. For any particular act, after all, there will always be particular and definite individuals involved, even if, at the time, it is not yet determined who those particular individuals will be. The question Kant asks us, then, is surely not *who* these particular persons will be but rather *how we intend to treat* those persons. As we have already discussed, the terrorists targeted an undetermined set of victims for the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, they clearly intended to use those victims purely as means rather than ends—to gain attention for their depraved “cause.” Surely then, the terrorists failed to satisfy Kant’s categorical imperative with respect to those undetermined people—“So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as means only.”¹² (See Chapter Nine, Section IV.)

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd Edition, James W. Ellington, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

The adequacy of the Kantian approach becomes even clearer when we turn to the first formulation of the categorical imperative—which asks whether we can consistently universalize the maxim under which we propose to act. This moral “test” of a given *kind* of action is clearly concerned with the *nature* of that act—along with one’s accompanying intentions and purposes—rather than with the particular circumstances or individuals involved. After all, Kant’s whole emphasis is upon the *universality* of the moral law—upon arriving at unrestricted moral generalizations within a consistent system of nature. As such, these generalizations (moral laws) are *categorical*—identifying moral obligations toward *whomever* may turn out to be involved. It cannot then matter that those particular persons have yet to be determined. Furthermore, this is borne out by one of Kant’s own examples: the duty to contribute to the welfare of others. This duty, of necessity, is a general duty toward undetermined persons—specifically, toward *any* needy person whom I may be able to help.

4. *The notion of making those in the future better off than they would otherwise be makes no sense.* Although there might, in some abstract sense, be obligations to future and even undetermined persons, there can be no obligation for us to attempt to improve the condition of future people.

A little reflection should reveal that your personal and genetic makeup is the result of millions of factors lying largely beyond human control. You would not exist if your parents had not met, nor if your grandparents or great-grandparents had not happened to meet. Your own unique genetic makeup would never have come into existence if one particular egg and one particular sperm had not united at your conception. Nor would many of your personality traits be what they are today if not for the countless environmental influences contributing to your development. In short, a huge number of chance events were necessary for *you* to come into existence as you are today. But the same can be said for every other individual living today as well. It thus seems that if things had gone even just a little differently a couple of generations ago, few if any of us would ever have come into existence.

Likewise, if we were to alter our *present* actions in some way, then a rather different set of *future* people would most likely come into existence compared with the set that would have otherwise come into existence. In particular, the future people who would result if we presently *do* choose to protect the environment would differ from those who would result if we *do not* presently choose to protect the environment. Suppose we in fact do not take any steps to protect the environment. According to this objection, it can then *make no sense* to say that the latter future people would have been “better off” if we *had* chosen to protect the environment. This makes no sense because *those* future people would then not have existed—and so could be neither better nor worse off! As Desjardins puts it: “Because the group who would be harmed by one choice would not exist unless we made that choice, it makes little sense to say that they would be ‘better off’ if we had made the other choice. Because different . . . decisions result in different future generations, there simply is no one future generation that would be made better or worse off by either of those decisions.”¹³

One response to this objection is to challenge the assumption that our making different choices now must always result in entirely different future populations. Admittedly, it is *highly probable* that our different choices would lead to significantly different future populations. But what is important to recognize is that this is only a matter of *probability*—not *necessity*. It is at least *possible* for different choices today to result in only somewhat different future populations (granted, there will almost certainly have to be *some* differences). But as long as it is *possible* for many of the same future people to exist in alternate scenarios, it is meaningful to speak of *those* people being better or worse off in those different scenarios. Because it can be meaningful to make such comparisons, the force of this objection is somewhat reduced.

¹³ Joseph R. Desjardins, *Environmental Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 78.

A better response is to challenge the objection's underlying assumption—the assumption that moral obligations always entail that those being affected could be made better or worse off. In fact, this seems false. Imagine a situation in which two independent terrorists, coincidentally, plan and carry out a bombing of exactly the same building at exactly the same time. Their bombs go off simultaneously, and 100 innocent people are killed. Surely both terrorists are fully responsible for this crime since both have violated their moral obligation not to harm these people. Let's also suppose that even if one of these terrorists had suddenly felt moral qualms and backed out at the last minute, the results would have been the same—the very same people would have been killed at the very same time (because of the actions of the other terrorist). In other words, whether or not this terrorist carried through with his plans, the affected people would still be no better off. Given this fact, does it follow that this terrorist had *no obligations one way or the other* in how he acted toward those people? Surely not; the fact that he can do nothing to make these people any better off does not in any way absolve him from guilt if he actually does carry out his plot.

Likewise, it makes no difference even if we can do nothing to make the set of future people any better off (for whatever reason, including the technical reason that they would otherwise never have existed). What *does* matter is the fact that we will have subjected actual people to harms that *we* could have avoided causing. Even if our only choice lies between actions that harm certain people versus actions that don't harm certain other people, our obligation should still be clear. Quite independently of whether or not we can make certain people better off, therefore, we can still have a moral obligation not to cause them harm.

Summary: *An objection claims that we cannot have moral obligations to as yet undetermined or indefinite persons. But all actual future persons are definite persons—whether we know who they will be or not. Further, there are many examples in which we certainly seem to have obligations towards*

IV. The Extent of Our Present Obligations

Given that we have an obligation to help ensure the existence and welfare of future generations, we must now consider just what those obligations come to. The most pressing problem is how to balance our obligations toward actual future people—our **future-directed obligations**—with our obligations toward those presently existing—our **present-directed obligations**. This problem arises because the interests of these two groups often come into conflict. For instance, our continuing use of fossil fuels is likely to yield catastrophic effects a few generations from now. To completely circumvent these effects, however, we would have to “retool” our present way of life,

giving up a great deal of what we take for granted and altering many of our present activities. Similarly, any effort on our part to significantly reduce pollution for the sake of future generations can be expected to be expensive and disruptive. In short, their gain is our pain and vice versa—we are rivals with respect to resources, needs, opportunities, etc. The moral problem, then, is to find the best way to meet both our own interests and those of future people.

Because this is a complex and involved topic, a detailed response cannot be developed here. However, we can sketch several principles to lay the foundation for providing such a response.

(1) We have the same kinds of obligations toward actual future people that we have toward present people.

While it is sometimes claimed that we can have no idea what interests and concerns future people will have, this is surely exaggerated. It is true that we cannot anticipate the specific problems that future people will encounter (just as past generations could not anticipate many of our present problems). Nevertheless, we *do* know that, as human beings, they will have the same fundamental interests and needs that we have: They will have interests in health and

survival, in attaining a decent quality of life, in being able to have healthy children, etc. Because future people will share roughly the same interests and needs that we already share with our contemporaries, our conditional moral duties toward them will resemble our present obligations toward each other: to not act in ways that could harm those people or their fundamental interests.

(2) Some obligations toward the future are weightier than others.

Our encounters with various moral dilemmas (in previous chapters) have shown that not all moral obligations are equally important. Just as some of our obligations toward our contemporaries outweigh others, some of our obligations toward future persons will outweigh other, less weighty obligations. For instance, it is more important, morally speaking, to provide food and shelter to a starving and homeless person than it is to provide a quality education or job training—though we may have a conditional obligation to provide all of these. Likewise, then, our weightiest obligations toward future generations involve their fundamental needs for breathable air, for safe food and water, for a livable climate, etc. Although they no doubt will also have interests in enjoying open green spaces and in attaining a high standard of living, our obligations to promote these latter interests are less pressing than our obligations to address the former.

(3) Weightier obligations toward future people must take precedence over less important obligations to our contemporaries.

But doesn't our increasing "distance" from successive future generations reduce our obligations toward them, especially when compared with our obligations toward ourselves and our contemporaries? Aren't our moral obligations *primarily* toward our contemporaries, only *secondarily* toward the *next* generation, and so on?

Although this idea of diminishing obligation has something to it (see point 4 next), the key to this issue has to do with the relative importance of the interests at stake. In particular, a life-and-death issue must take precedence over a quality-of-life or convenience issue—regardless of how far in time we may be removed from the persons being affected. We have already laid the foundation for this principle in our consideration of the similarity between our interests and the fundamental interests of future persons. Given their moral equivalence to us as persons, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that the moral rights of people of *any* generation must be on a par. Unless we are willing to discriminate against people based upon their temporal distance from us, we must therefore acknowledge that our obligation to help meet the fundamental needs for future people must take precedence over obligations we might have to promote less weighty interests among ourselves. This has immediate implications. For instance, our obligation to head off the profound threat of global warming (a matter of life and health) must take precedence over our interests in the convenience of driving automobiles, in running a profitable business, etc. Likewise, future people's fundamental need for clean air and safe water must take precedence over our present interests in saving time and money by dumping contaminants into the air and water.

(4) Our obligations to head off harms diminish as our knowledge, understanding, and ability to control those harms diminish.

As previously mentioned, there is *something* to the idea of diminishing obligations. However, our having more limited obligations to future people results from the fact that we have less knowledge and control over the future, not, specifically, because future people are separated from us in time. The further we attempt to reach into the future, furthermore, the less knowledge and control we are likely to have. (The same principle operates with respect to our geographical separation from others—where greater spatial distances likewise tend to correlate

with reduced knowledge and reduced control.) Quite generally, the less our knowledge or control over a situation, the more limited our obligations and responsibilities.

Thus, although we have good reason to believe that our present consumption of fossil fuels will heat the globe, cause flooding, and promote disease in the next few centuries, we are much less certain about how our present fuel consumption will affect people living a millennium from now—or how those people might combat those effects. In addition, although our dumping of contaminants into the air and water will no doubt affect the Earth for a long time, we are best equipped to understand and predict only the most immediate effects of these actions. Our ability to influence and control future events likewise decreases the further we reach into the future. Since knowledge tends to be empowering, this is true partly because we cannot control as effectively what we do not know as well. However, it is also true that the more distant an effect is from its cause, the more opportunities there are for other factors to alter that effect—thus reducing our power to achieve the effect we intend. The moral implication of all this is that, as our knowledge and our power to influence the future diminish, so too does our obligation to take specific action for the sake of future people's needs and interests.

There is thus some justification for the notion of diminishing obligations, simply because we have more knowledge and control over what is nearest to us. Although this does not greatly reduce the weight of our most important obligations to future people (it certainly gives us no right to *ignore* our obligations to future people), it does seem to imply that

4') An obligation to present people will normally take precedence over an obligation of the same sort (involving the same needs and interests) to future people.

It must again be emphasized that this holds, not because present people take precedence over future people, but rather because we have a greater obligation to address a need when we know more and have more ability to address that need.¹⁴

(5) We have an obligation to invest ourselves in understanding the future and the future effects of our actions.

Although *unavoidable* ignorance can excuse people from causing harms to others (this helps excuse past generations for the environmental problems they have caused us), one *can* still be morally obligated to overcome harm-causing ignorance. Good intentions are no excuse if the person causing a terrible outcome *should have known* what was going to happen and *could have then taken steps* to avoid it.¹⁵ How does this apply in the present context? For one thing, we must not rationalize away our obligations to the future by “grasping at straws.” For instance, it is *possible* that the present trend in global warming will be offset by an unexpected cooling of the sun's surface. While this is possible, however, we have no legitimate reason to expect it. Grasping at such “straws” to excuse our not addressing global warming is morally unjustifiable. (Similarly, it is morally reprehensible to shoot a machine gun into a crowd of people—even if it is always *possible* that no one will actually be hit.) Rather, we have a moral duty to seek accurate facts, develop defensible theories, and then act on the basis of what we have the best reasons to believe.

¹⁴ Though less likely, if it were to happen that we are better equipped to address some *future* need instead, then that future-directed obligation would take precedence over a present need of the same sort.

¹⁵ This claim is persuasively argued by W. K. Clifford, who identified the moral obligation to keep oneself from avoidable ignorance and error. According to Clifford, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” The point is well taken, even though there are problems with Clifford's claim (what, after all, could count as sufficient evidence in support of our believing Clifford's claim itself?). William K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” *Contemporary Review* (1877). This article can be found online at http://myweb.lmu.edu/tshanahan/Clifford-Ethics_of_Belief.html (accessed February 13, 2010).

In addition, we have a moral obligation to try, at least, to discover how we might eliminate the harms we think our present activities are likely to bring upon future people. Yet, suppose that, for whatever reasons, we find ourselves *unable* to do much to alter, say, either our ongoing depletion of ready energy reserves (through our burning of fossil fuels) or the resulting trend in global warming. Under such conditions, we might be excused for maintaining our present activities—despite the harms they will cause to future generations—as long as we “make up for” these harms by compensating those affected in some way or other. After all, it is a fundamental principle of justice that if I harm another person by my behavior, I have an obligation to compensate that person by providing him or her with something of roughly equal value. At the very least, then, our present activities place us under an obligation to invest significantly in research and technological development that could help future generations counter the effects of our present activities. Specifically, if we cannot stop burning fossil fuels, then we have an obligation to research alternate energy sources that could replace what we are presently using up. Likewise, if we cannot keep from contributing to global warming, then we have an obligation to take steps that could help shield future people from coastal flooding, that could begin eradicating tropical diseases while they are still relatively contained, and that could develop productive, drought-resistant crops to avoid future food shortages.¹⁶

Summary: *Given moral obligations toward future people, how should we balance such future-directed obligations with obligations we presently have toward each other (present-directed obligations)? Certain basic principles can guide such considerations: (1) our future-directed obligations*

For Reflection and Discussion

1. *Can you think of some examples of moral obligations you might have toward people in the past? Toward people in the future?*
2. *Give some simple examples illustrating the Principle of Obligation. Can you think of any exceptions to this principle?*
3. *Summarize some of the problems that arise if we limit our moral community to our contemporaries.*
4. *The text argues that our moral community includes future humanity. Does our moral community include past people as well?*
5. *Are there differences in the ways we can have obligations toward past, present, and future people?*
6. *Explain the difference between actual people and merely possible people. Can you give any examples of merely possible people?*
7. *Why is it not possible to wrong merely possible people?*
8. *What reasons are there for thinking we have an obligation to preserve humanity? Which of these reasons do you find most compelling?*
9. *How would you explain, in your own words, objection 3 concerning undetermined persons?**
10. *Do we have to know exactly who someone is to have obligations toward that person? Provide some additional examples of such persons besides those discussed in the text.***
11. *Why do some argue that we can have no obligation to improve the condition of future people?**
12. *Suppose that the present generation takes action now to protect the environment for future people. Do you think it is possible for at least some future people to still be the same as those who would have existed if the present generation takes no such action?**
13. *Explain how we can still have moral obligations toward people even if we cannot make them any better or worse off.***
14. *In view of the principles discussed in Section IV, to what degree do we have a moral responsibility to give up some of the advantages we enjoy with our cars for the sake of*

¹⁶ The idea of compensatory obligations to future generations is that of Brian Barry and is discussed on pp. 89–90 of Desjardins’s *Environmental Ethics*.

future generations? What about the rapid present-day development of new entertainment technologies?

For Further Reading

Desjardins, Joseph R. *Environmental Ethics*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993.

Saugstad, Jen. "Moral Responsibility towards Future Generations of People: Utilitarian and Kantian Ethics Compared." Lecture at University of Oslo, June 17, 1994.
folk.uio.no/jenssa/Future%20Generations.htm (accessed February 12, 2010).

A huge number of online resources—both dependable and not—discuss global warming. The interested reader is encouraged to carry out an online search of this topic, evaluating resources with care.

Suggested Cases

1) See Case 2 from Chapter Two: *Sex Selection*. Answer the following questions: If parents choose the sex of their next child instead of letting that child's sex be determined naturally, are they in any way wronging any actual future child? If so, how?

2) See Case 1 from Chapter Seven: *Should Your Next Car Be a Hybrid?* Also see Case 3 from Chapter Eight: *Global Warming and Oil*. Answer the following question: In view of our having moral responsibilities toward future generations, do car buyers today have at least a conditional moral duty to buy a hybrid car—or at least to not purchase a gas-guzzler?

3) See Case 5 from Chapter Nine: *Beefy Burgers and a Lean Future*. Answer one of the following questions: (a) Are Americans wronging other contemporaries and/or future people by pursuing their appetite for beef? (b) Since the regular consumption of red meat lowers life expectancy because of its association with heart disease and cancer, would a parent commit a wrong against his or her existing or future children by eating large quantities of beef?

4) See Case 1 from Chapter Twelve: *Parent Responsibility Toward Their in-Utero Child*. Suppose that a woman is *not* now pregnant but considers it likely that she will become pregnant within the year. Suppose, further, that her present drug habits add significant risks to any pregnancy for at least two years after she gives up her habit. Answer the following question: What is her moral responsibility, if any, to her probable future child?

Supplementary Materials: Moral Obligations toward the Future

Summary of Moral Obligations toward the Future

Although our moral concerns usually involve our contemporaries, it would appear that we can have obligations toward—and make claims upon—people in the past. Intuitively, it also seems that we can have obligations toward future generations. This has important moral implications for how we live today.

Nevertheless, a number of objections have been brought against our having moral obligations toward actual future people (those who actually will exist, as opposed to those who are merely possible).

The most obvious objection claims that we cannot have any obligations toward people who do not presently exist. However, this conflicts with many examples where there do seem to be such

obligations. It also conflicts with the Principle of Obligation, which states that whenever a person A's free action can significantly harm some person B or B's important interests, A has a *conditional moral duty* (see Section II of Chapter Nine) not to act in that way. This principle, furthermore, seems to hold whether or not the people affected might belong to a different moral community.

A second objection maintains that we have no obligation to ensure that future generations exist. It is true that we cannot wrong a merely possible person by failing to bring that person into existence. We thus have no obligation to merely possible future people to bring them into existence. But natural law theory, utilitarianism, divine command theory, and the intrinsic value of the species all support an obligation to ensure the existence of future generations. Further, we likely have obligations to present and past people to ensure that their projects and interests remain respected into the future. This, too, entails an obligation to ensure the existence of future people.

**A more subtle objection claims that we cannot have moral obligations to as-yet-undetermined or indefinite persons. But all actual future persons are definite persons—whether we know who they will be or not. Further, there are many examples in which we have obligations toward undetermined sets of persons. Finally, several moral theories—including Kant's—support obligations toward persons who as yet remain undetermined.

A final objection asserts that there can be no obligation toward future persons because we can't make them better or worse off. We can't do this, furthermore, because the same people wouldn't exist if we acted differently. But it is not so clear that some of the same people couldn't exist even if we were to act differently, and those people could be made better or worse off. More importantly, it isn't true that moral obligations depend upon our ability to make those affected better or worse off.**

Given moral obligations toward future people, how should we balance such future-directed obligations with obligations we presently have toward each other (present-directed obligations)? Certain basic principles can guide such considerations: (1) Our future-directed obligations are no different in kind from present-directed obligations; (2) some future-directed obligations are more important than others; (3) the weightiest future-directed obligations can take precedence over less weighty present-directed obligations; (4) our obligations nevertheless diminish as our knowledge, understanding, and ability to control the relevant situations diminish; (5) ignorance and lack of control are no excuse if they can be avoided—i.e., we have an obligation to invest ourselves in expanding our knowledge, especially as it pertains to the future.