

Duties to, and Rights of, Future Generations: An Impossibility Theorem

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The Standard View

It is rather widely claimed that there are such things as Rights of Future Generations, rights constraining those who live at present. We are abjured not to waste various resources, on the ground that they belong to people in the future just as much as to us, or that they will need them as much as we do, etc.; and that we are not to “ruin” the environment in some way or other, and must share what we have with these future occupants of the earth.

Thus, for example, the Green Party of Canada:

“We must work within these limits [to the “carrying capacity of the planet”.] Otherwise, we will exhaust resources, degrade our environment and put our economy, health and children’s future at risk.”¹

It is not surprising that people say this sort of thing. After all, people in the future are people, and differ from us only in the usual ways that people differ from each other, apart from which we all have the common humanity that is the source of our rights. That common humanity, whatever it is, being essentially the same for all, would therefore endow us all with the same moral properties, and therefore with the same rights - would it not? And we all think that we all do have rights - human rights - against each other.

A Note about Rights

This paper is concerned with claims that future generations have *rights* especially, that they have rights *against us*. That is a distinctive idea, not to be assimilated to other moral ideas, notably the idea that it might be virtuous, or a good thing, to do things intended to benefit future people. What’s the difference?

As here employed, the difference is that rights are *imposed* or *imposable*, whereas other moral categories are *recommended* and singled out for praise (or blame), say. But we may not *constrain* people to be virtuous or praiseworthy (except where the virtue is justice, which is a matter of rights.) Any proposal that people may be required under threat of punishment, or that they may have properties or incomes taken from them without their specific consent, is here understood to be, *ipso facto*, a proposal about rights. Those who claim that some proposal is not about rights, but then insist on political action to promote the proposal in question, are fudging this distinction. Any such proposal we automatically account here as concerned with rights, whether or not the advocate wants to apply that term. The reason is simple: when it’s a matter of rights, we’re in for a fight. When it’s not, we’re in for a session with our consciences, our weltanचाungen, our ideals of life. *Others* can, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, advise, but they can’t *compel*. Governments, on the other hand, can and do just that. We sit up and take notice of such things.

In the present context, the granting of rights to future generations has a very good chance of being invoked on behalf of taxes and any number of impositions on our various lifestyles. It’s no abstract little game, this future-rights business!

Two Asymmetries: Existential and Epistemic

Of course, in saying that future people have rights against us, there are implicit claims about what our common rights *are*; and those claims might be in error. If they are, it might be that very different conclusions are forthcoming in regard to what we, the presently living, should do about the not-yet but someday-to-be living. That is one thing I will explore in this discussion. I will point to two serious asymmetries, which together, I think, make it impossible to maintain in any really serious way that we have “obligations” to “future

¹ From their web site.

generations.” I shall call the two “existential” and “epistemic” (or, more accurately if more clumsily, “technological-epistemic.”) The last pages of this discussion are devoted to the second.

The first of them has two aspects. Aspect One, a point of possibly considerable importance, is this: unlike persons at present, the existence of people in the future, and especially of any particular sort of persons, let alone any persons in particular, is by no means a sure thing. It is, of course, for quite some time a very *likely* thing; but more importantly, how many and what sort of people exist in the future depends *entirely* on what is done by persons in the present. We tend to take for granted the continued existence of people, and of course that is usually entirely justified. But for present purposes, we mustn't ignore this basic if obvious point: that people exist only because the children who will mature into them, and prior to that the fetuses and embryos from which they spring, have previously existed. But the existence of those organisms is dependent on the normally voluntary activities of present people - specifically sexual activities, of course, but a good many others as well. In short, who if any there are in the future is *up to us*. This makes it a bit awkward to maintain that *we owe them* a lot, since one might surely say that *they owe us* the very fact that they *exist*.

At least a good deal of our interaction with others is negotiated, bargained, agreed on. If we bargain with people, it makes a difference, one would think, whether those people come into existence entirely because of what *some* of the bargainers (namely, us) do. Suppose that parties A and B are bargaining about something, and that B exists only if A does certain things. It might be imagined that A could argue as follows: “Look, if you insist on having x, y, and z from me, then I simply won't play - I won't bring you into existence at all - so there!” A, we might well suppose, can bring B into existence *on condition* that B settles for less: only x, for example, rather than the whole package of x, y and z. B, after all, will have no choice in the matter.

But of course, putting it that way has the problem that it doesn't obviously make sense. For if B doesn't *exist* at time t, then A has no B to bargain with at time t; but if B does exist, already, then it is too late and we are now bargaining with independent persons - we can't impose conditions on B's very existence in that case.

Well, yes and no. For of course A might have a degree of power over B such that he is in a position to dictate to B the terms of B's *continued* existence: don't comply, and A kills B, and that's that so far as B's bargaining agenda is concerned. Where B is, say, a freshly born infant, B doesn't have any bargaining power - there's not much B can do to A (other than annoy her big time if she insists on keeping him around!) - whereas A could readily kill B. Or again, in too many times and places, B is a slave and A is B's master, so that A can say such things as imagined here with complete confidence in his power to do the dictating in question.

Aspect Two

All of that sounds pretty macabre, and it's not the point of this essay to advocate infanticide or slavery. Rather, it is to point up a logical problem that pervades all discussion of future generations. What I have said so far is, in a way, the flip side of the fundamental problem just mentioned, namely, that there is an enormous asymmetry between us and “future people.” Aspect Two of that problem is charmingly but accurately posed in the reposte attributed to an Austrian playwright of some generations back, an author of topical farces, when asked why he didn't do something for “future generations.” He is said to have replied, “Why should I do anything for future generations? What have future generations done for me!?” Well, it was no doubt intended facetiously, but it's a real question: Why, indeed?

Lots of us, of course, will *want* to do well by the folks in that future - probably almost all readers of this are among them, as am I. But some won't care, quite possibly. I don't think the latter can be ignored or laughed out of court. We owe them a decent answer to their question: why, indeed, do *they* “owe something” to all those folks in the future?

We shouldn't ignore them - after all, we're philosophers. But they can be marginalized, as we shall shortly see, because in fact they're no particular problem. For it is quite enough to say: Well, the future is our baby, and not yours - no problem! We don't need your help! (And moreover, it is absolutely impossible that we could *get* it from you even if we did!) This is not what the Usual View says, of course. It insists that we all have these heavy-duty obligations to the future. On my more reasonable account of the matter, we basically *don't*.

Before pursuing that further, however, a brief but relevant excursion on an interestingly different assessment of the situation.....

A Side Note on Human Existence

This being so, there are some who hold that the morally right thing to do about future people is to see to it that there aren't any. This interesting - if not exactly enticing - view has been developed at book length recently by David Benatar² who argues that our primary obligation to future generations is to make sure they *don't come into existence at all*. It is, as Benatar agrees, difficult to formulate the argument without paradox. The curious title of his book, "Never to have been Born," suggests that quickly enough. We do not do person X a favor by not bringing him into existence, since if we don't, there will be no person who can be said to be or to have been the recipient of that benefit. (For this reason, I argued once upon a time that we do not do a benefit to person X by bringing him into existence either, since it's a "favor" I could not possibly *not* have done X.)

OK; but still, whether or not we are persuaded by his arguments, we can at least understand someone who believes what Benatar claims to believe, and who acts on it by not having any children. A more extreme way to act on his idea would be to go around murdering people, but Benatar agrees that won't do, since once a person *is* in existence, it's too late to do "him" the favor of not bringing him into existence (more about this in a moment....), and even if it was a mistake to bring him into existence, he might do better now to remain alive. So Benatar upholds the Shaker view.³

To support his view, of course, we require his controversial premise that existence is somehow bad, and that it is so in a morally important, relevant sense. We can easily sympathize with the view that whether life is worth living, for any person, depends on whether the good outweighs the bad, and would, I hope, think it implausible that it generally does not. But Benatar depends *only* on the premise that everyone's life has *some* evil in it - some pain, say. Now Benatar holds that the absence of pain is good, even if there is no one who experiences that absence; whereas he thinks that the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is someone who is deprived of same.⁴ He addresses, not very satisfactorily, the question, "good for whom?" And that, I think, is where the trouble begins.

When I do something, I address options and consequences in the light of *my* values - not of *yours*. I can and must make a judgment as to how I'm going to *count* your values, if you have some. In the case where there are other people actually on the scene, I do this in part by making arrangements with them, agreeing to do this or that provided they do thus-and-so, and vice versa. But there's no making agreements with the nonexistent. And until there are existents, I have no duties to them - obviously. So: do I have a duty to refrain from bringing into existence some other person, or alternatively a duty to bring him into existence, on the grounds of how *that person* would feel if I did? No, actually. I and people I care about might like or dislike to have such-and-such a person around as a result of my procreative action (or lack of same: future grandparents, take note ...!); and, of course, once he exists, there will indeed be duties toward him which, if I am reluctant to fulfill them, I could no doubt avoid the necessity of by not having him. But until there is someone who results from this activity, the question of having duties to him or her doesn't get off the ground.

Now, I believe that Benatar has gotten crossed up on this matter, as follows. Yes: our general duty to others is to refrain from injuring them - to refrain, roughly speaking, from making them worse off than they would have been if I hadn't acted, or perhaps if I weren't around at all. But, do I make, say, the nonexistent Algernon Narveson worse off *by not having brought him into existence*? No. Did I make the real Narveson children worse off *by* (helping to bring) them into existence? No. Do I owe it to Algernon to refrain from making him badly off by refraining from having him at all? Obviously I don't owe it to *him*. Who, then? The

² David Benatar, *Better Never to have been Born* (OUP 2006)

³ Thanks to my wife for pointing out that his view is exactly what the Shakers held (namely, that reproduction is a sin, even though murder etc are wrong.) She wonders how Benatar is at designing furniture (Shaker furniture brings a heady price these days!) - but I won't investigate that issue...

⁴ (I believe I made this point in my 1978 paper, "Future People and Us," in Sikora and Barry, *Obligations to Future Generations* (Temple University Press, 1978)

“universe”? Sorry: I don’t owe a thing to the universe. Possibly, the people who will have to take care of her if I do? But then, they just might vote in favor, not against. You never can tell ...

Now, Benatar apparently thinks he does have such a duty. “Of the pain of an existing person ... the absence of this pain would have been good even if this could only have been achieved by the absence of the person who now suffers it.” (31) He adds, “We may not know who that person would have been, but we can still say that whoever that person would have been, the avoidance of his or her pains is good when judged in terms of his or her potential interests.” (31) Well, you can *say* that, yes: but if we are going to talk in this loose way about “potential interests,” then we can also say that the presence of the pleasures he would have is good when judged in those same terms. If the former counts against bringing him into existence, why wouldn’t the latter count in favor of doing so? Our normal way of reasoning, viz by weighing the benefits and costs and acting when the balance favors benefit, and favors it more than any alternative, would seem to apply here, straightforwardly.

That Benatar’s idea is at least apparently overstated is suggested when we ask, OK: is this area (I point to the several cubic feet of empty space before me) a *good thing* because it contains no one in pain?

For that matter, we are also free to hold that it is a good thing that there are people, *even if they do suffer*, and even if they suffer quite a lot. Parents sometimes bring children into existence whom they know will have a tough lot in life. They think it a better thing that there be such a child than not, pain and all. Are they wrong about this? Maybe. But do they violate a *duty* to somebody by doing this? No. Not, certainly, a duty to the child, since there was no such thing to have a duty to prior to its birth, and afterwards, it is too late - unless you wish, contrary to Benatar’s view, to resort to mercy killing. (As some actual parents have done, to be sure. But we really can have our doubts about that, and the Benatar argument surely doesn’t depend on a special view about this.)

When we bring people into existence, we may think we make the world more interesting - a plausible view. And we may think we make it happier - also a plausible view, often. Whatever, we also thereby bring into existence moral subjects, people to whom we now, certainly, will have and will be able to have various obligations and such. But their sheer existence is, I think, an *existential matter*.

By the way, do the values of these very people count? Well, they certainly count for *them*. Each person can face the question whether to continue in life. Not very many people ask the question, and most, I think, would think it a downright silly one: *of course* they want to continue in life. But some few do not, to be sure, and they, I think, have a right to kill themselves (in the absence of strong duties to others to keep alive - which is possible, but fairly rare, I think.) And they also count for us, or should: we should think it better if people are happy and lead interesting lives, and worse if they are miserable and lead awful lives. The many people in the third world who have reduced their family size by half or so over the past half-century or so make both themselves and the children they do have happier by their actions. It’s not the alleged benefit to the children they don’t have that make this sensible: it’s the *real* benefit to the smaller families they *actually* have that does that. But that they’d be better off having *no* children is a story you’re not likely to be able to sell those people.

General Duties to our Fellows

A further point, which I by no means intend to deny, is that we *do* have duties to our neighbors, and to people in general, to refrain from inflicting evil on them, and I could presumably do this by inflicting evil people on them. *If* I could *know* that an offspring of mine would murder someone, then I would agree that I have a duty to that potential victim to refrain from having this child. But of course, if you could predict that, you could also presumably prevent this evil at a later stage.

(A more interesting case is: what if one among the dozen children I have will murder someone, but I don’t know which or who (until it’s too late)? Do I then have the duty to refrain from having *any* of them? I think that’s a tougher one. But at some point, the answer is surely negative. Suppose we can predict that one out of 500 newborns will eventually murder someone. Should we prohibit that set of parents from having any of those 500? I think not. Or make it 5000 or 50000 - the point becomes quite clear. That society would be better if

there were no murders, and therefore no murderers, is plausible enough. That it would be better if the way in which we avoided those murders was by avoiding having the *entire society* is, to put it mildly, *not* plausible.)

The two aspects of the issue that I identified before the preceding excursion are related. One aspect was that future people exist only because of what we do. The other aspect is that by the time they are on the scene, *we are off* it. So on the one hand, they are not in much of a position to hold us to any sort of obligations. And on the other, we simply are in no position to make any deals anyway, of any kind. Our relations to future people are *purely existential*.

Conditions for Doing Things for the Future

Despite the absence of literal duties to future generations, we should do something for them if (and *only* if)

- (1) we like the idea of future generations, want them to flourish,
- (2) we have reason to expect that there will be some of them *to* do any flourishing, and
- (3) there really is something we can do for them.

But suppose we don't particularly care? *Present* generations have the extremely important property that they *can* and *do* "do something for us" - *all the time*. Everything we value, virtually, is the product of other people's industry, ingenuity, and investment - usually a great many people, but in any case, at least virtually always, at least some people. We are not islands, and are less so now than we ever were.

But we thrive among all this extremely helpful activity by the rest of humanity because it's almost entirely voluntary. We *buy* almost all these things, and a few more are free gifts.

(Note: There is also what is thrust upon us by governments, along with tax bills they present us for what they have decided are further benefits. But we will ignore this in the present discussion, by and large, especially because, of course, despite its problems, the point only further confirms the fact of human interdependence. It doesn't undermine the point about voluntariness *if* we think that democracy makes government voluntary enough to pass muster - I don't, myself, but that's another issue, which we will table for the duration of this paper.⁵)

Voluntary activity is motivated by the interests of the agent; typically the motive is self-interest. Respecting the free agency of others, and promoting one's own interests, gets the job done: humanity flourishes. The success of the market in human society drives home the point that to promote the social good, we do not need onerous duties to contribute to that good - it will happen anyway, given only that people respect each other rather than making war on them. Adam Smith's Invisible Hand works!⁶

Gratitude?

Now, the background for all this originated in the past. All those now dead inventors who gave us the light bulb and the internal combustion engine and so on, indefinitely, made their contributions without our being able to return the favor. Note that it is a profound level of inability: for it is *impossible* for us literally to *do* anything at all for them. This also means that there is no sense to the claim that we are "free riding" on their efforts; what they've done is *done*, and any gratitude or ingratitude we might manifest is whistling in the wind, which blows inexorably in one direction only. The closest thing to what *is* possible along that line is incorporated into the exchange system, which includes royalty payments and many other benefits for the heirs, literal or commercial, of the inventors and entrepreneurs whose past efforts paved the way to our present prosperity. Yet after accepting all that, the gap remains: we *owe* future generations *nothing*, insofar as what we owe people for is *benefits conferred*; for of course, they aren't around as yet, and so cannot do any conferring on us, who are all persons in their pasts.

⁵ The subject is discussed at some depth in my *You and the State* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008)

⁶ Readers who think they doubt this should consult the magnificent recent book by Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist*.

We could, of course, say that we “owe” people in the past for their services to us, which are undoubtedly immense. But for the above reason, it’s a bit academic, since there is no way to thank *them* for it.

A Green Slogan

Another thought is that we owe *future* people the sort of benefits that *past* people have conferred on us. This has the oddity that we are “thanking” B for the services of A. A Green slogan, more or less carrying on this theme, has it that “we don’t inherit the planet from our parents - we borrow it from our children!”

But this can’t be taken literally. For, *obviously*, we *do* inherit the world from our predecessors, who made the place as nice as it is (and in part, as bad as it is). And obviously we can’t literally be *borrowing* the place from people who *do not exist*. The slogan, clearly - and no surprisingly - simply begs the moral question rather than answering it.

We don’t need those Obligations

To repeat, then, why do we suppose we *owe* anything to “future generations”? The view that we owe future people *nothing* is not popular, but it is not obviously wrong. Still, ‘owe’ does not cover everything. Indeed, it covers very little, and is thus far from the best word. For clearly we - most of us, anyway - *want* there to be a future of humankind, and we want to leave those future people well off, simply out of general human interest - a sort of benevolence. And then there are our children - those of us who have any, at any rate. Most of us who have children have them because we want to have them, and we take care of them and invest in their future for familiar human reasons; or, at least, even if these are not what everyone would call ‘reasons,’ there are familiar impulses, motives, that get us into doing these things, and most of us want to do a lot of the things impelled by those motives. We very much hope that there will for long, maybe always, be people around. True - but still, that is not a source of the kind of obligations we clearly do have to our currently existing fellow persons.

Human benevolence is generally pretty limited in its temporal reach. We have children and, hopefully, grandchildren whom we see before we die; a fair number see great-grandchildren, and a tiny few perhaps great-great grandchildren, and that’s that. We don’t look down the ages and think with fondness of specific *n*th-generation descendants, where *n* is greater than about 4. Yet, of course, mankind, we reasonably suppose - or at least hope - will last a lot longer than that. And philosophical writers about future generations talk in terms of the ages.

But while they do, there is absolutely no *need* to do so, insofar as we are trying to account for felt senses of obligation. For the motivation to “do something for future generations” doesn’t need to go beyond one’s near-generation offspring. If almost everybody exerts himself or herself on behalf of her children, then the rest will take care of itself, since those children will care for their children who will care for *their* children, and so ad infinitum. On the motivational side, then, there simply is no puzzle, no problem, no paradox, about future generations. It’s all an obvious side-effect of wholly familiar, fairly near-at-hand processes and interests. And while we do feel and occasionally actually have obligations to our offspring, the claim that we have general obligations to future generations, independently of and additional to the normal obligations and duties we have toward each other now, including to our own children, in addition to being philosophically unaccountable on any rational basis, is in any case *unnecessary*.

The argument so far, then, makes the whole subject of our relation to future people a matter of sentiment. Ordinary justice does not depend on this at all. We owe the banker, the grocer, our wives, and no end of other persons various things because we have made many agreements with them, and so we have our end of a bargain or bargains to hold up - not because we have a fondness for grocers, moneylenders, etc. (We do have a fondness for spouses and friends; and some of our obligations to them certainly stem from that. Yet even there, most

stem from agreements and cooperative considerations.) This fund of interest could certainly be genetic, and I presume in some sense is - though just how that bears on the many cases of persons who don't want and don't have any children, I don't know. The point is that we don't *need* anything more than this.

Side Note on Genetics

Our genes don't go in for moral philosophy very much. They prod us to reproduce, and most of us do. That sets the stage for all sorts of things, including morals. Someone who thinks that somehow the world would be a better place with no people in it has weird taste in worlds, for one thing, and a lousy view of humanity for another - but that's all. Others (like you and I) differ. So the Benatars among us can just go ahead and not reproduce, and lament those of us who do; but telling us that what we are doing is *wrong*? Forget it!

Not that we don't have more in the way of *felt senses* of obligation - doubtless many do. Some have maintained that this is *genetic*. Thus, one writer says,

“I hope it is obvious that there is in fact a genetic interest involved in the intuition that we have obligations to future generations. ... It is, therefore, highly in our genes' interests for us to have some sense of obligation to the future of our species - the future is where our genes will continue to spread and survive.”⁷

This is a currently popular idea, no doubt. But the trouble with these sociobiological explanations is that they talk about what our *genes* want, when the question - as I perhaps need to remind people - is, what do *we* want? If genetic explanations really worked, one would expect the phenomena they posit to be universal: absolutely everybody would think it his or her duty to have children, make the earth a good place for future generations, and so on. But obviously these phenomena are by means universal. Many people simply don't care very much about - have little or no sympathy with - all those other folks in the future. Indeed, many people have no children, by choice. When *those* people are said to have this “genetic interest” in the future, just what is the empirical content of that claim?

What it looks very much like is this: the Union of Right-Minded Green Folk want to play the genetic card, dialectically, against these wrong-minded folk who don't agree with them. It's a familiar card, and it much too often works - but it's a fake.

Harms To Future Generations

Of course, philosophers will now conjure up examples in which, supposedly, some policy very beneficial to us now would be so at enormous cost to future people. There are two very different things to say about such examples, apart from the fact that most of them are fanciful.

One is that someone proposing to initiate some such activity will be in conflict with others of us who do care about the people he's going to harm in the future, and it is not obvious why he should get his way and we not. Indeed, we can accurately say that in proposing to harm certain people in the future, he's harming *us* - the people who care about those people.

We might be able to make that specific. Here's a man who is messing up his farmland, dumping toxic wastes onto it, whatever. Of course, one reason not to do that is that it's stupid: in reducing the fertility or livability of his land he is, of course, reducing its value. Doesn't he care about *that*? Most likely, he does. But if not? He may well be poisoning his neighbors' land too, in which case, of course, they can (and probably will) sue him. (When he dies, the neighbors' children will also acquire his poisoned land for a song, clean it up, and put it back into production. Many pundits will claim that land can be permanently damaged, etc. Empirical evidence for this has a way of vanishing, as with the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, which dissipated all by themselves while the environmentalists thundered in apocalyptic language.)

⁷ [Norman Schultz, “But What Has Posterity Ever Done For Me?” - web]

Second Asymmetry: Technological/Epistemic

This last sort of example brings us to the other asymmetry, which concerns technology and its growth. That is the subject of the next part of this essay. Doing things to people in the considerable future entails a problem that works rather the opposite way compared with the first general problem we were concerned with. There the point was that there is an asymmetry such that we can do things to future people that they can't do to us. True. But it is also true that future people will be able to do things to and for themselves and each other that *we* can't do to or for *them*. Future people will have means of frustrating our current efforts to discomfit them - should we want to do that - that we are powerless to do anything about. That's because the ways of frustrating us that malevolent persons could be annoyed by haven't been discovered yet, and by the time they are, those folks will be dead.

In the first place, of course, the fact that we will all be dead by then and so can do nothing to promote the malevolent interests in question beyond what we do now, is itself of considerable importance. (The bad guys set the time bombs now, but by the time they are to go off the perpetrators are gone, and their intended victims have found out how they work and deactivated them.)

But, secondly, they will *know* a lot more than we do. Since they will have both ample motivation to undo whatever evils present people may be intent on doing - since, by hypothesis, those are evils - and by that time, *we* will be dead, and therefore won't be able to do anything to restore efficacy to our evil deeds, future people hold *all the trumps* in that regard. Thus future people have an enormous advantage over us. It is, I shall point out, one that is quite certainly going to far outweigh any effect of the disparity of our relative chronological situations.

Technology and Futurity

I need hardly remind the reader that we currently enjoy, and take for granted as ordinary, amenities that were almost entirely undreamed of in 1900. No one could have foreseen these developments, and those who made themselves famous by trying were mostly laughably off base. Meanwhile, the pace of technology growth has increased enormously, and is still going on, faster than ever in all likelihood. We now have many more people devoting their considerable skills and intelligences to the development of an endless array of useful gadgets, or the technical lore that will enable further development of still more. What does all this imply?

In brief, it implies, firstly, that we, by comparison, *don't know very much*, a point beefed up by the evident fact that much of what we think we know will certainly prove to be wrong. That is helpful, but hard to appreciate (and perhaps hard to take!): after all, we do know a lot now, by comparison with what people knew before. But then, this very fact, of the enormous disparity between what *we* know and what *they* knew, points toward a future, say 100 years hence, where the people *then* will know so much more than we do now, that they can (and will) condescendingly look back at us with smirks or sympathetic smiles. While we know a lot, we also know that we are certain to have been wrong about many things, and, much more important, we know that they will know *immensely* more than we do.

The big problem in getting the previous kind of point to sink in is that - *obviously* - we cannot say, apart from very general and indeterminate description, *what* they will know that we don't: after all, precision would require that we already know it. But the whole point is that we *don't*. In any case, we can safely list some topics about which we may be completely confident that people a hundred years from now will be able to do things that we simply can't imagine at present. Most or all forms of cancer, for example, will probably be an open book by then. That's a plausible prediction, but of course it can't be based on information about just what will be on those pages.

Knowledge and Power

The point of this essay is to remind ourselves that among these things, of which we know little and they know by comparison so much more, will be found *everything that matters to the present subject*. Will we run out of oil? Maybe - since there must be a finite amount of it and, so far, we do keep on using it. Right. Will we find lots of new oil? Yes. Will we find enough to supply ourselves indefinitely? Presumably not - though even that is not certain.

But by the time that would become a major problem, the question will be - so, *who cares?* For by then we will be using hitherto undreamed of (or only dreamed of) sources of energy (such as nuclear fusion.) Does anyone seriously think that we will be driving automobiles with internal combustion engines in the year 2433? I doubt it. At the same time, none of us knows what people then *will* be driving, or whether they'll even be "driving" at all, for that matter; we don't have much of an inkling of that. All we can be sure of is that it will be something quite else from what we have now, certainly far more efficacious in getting us where we want to go, and very likely far less invasive in the bad ways that automobiles and such are now. (Though even on that point, ingenious mankind has taken us a long way. Contemporary gasoline-burning cars, for example, are incredibly clean.⁸ Meanwhile, if we ask, just what *will* we do with all that oil? The only reasonable answer at present is: who knows?

A One-Way Street: Forward

There's another extremely important side to it, of which we need reminding: what we knew from before doesn't get buried or forgotten. Instead, we *build* on it. And so, the direction is *up*. On any reasonable surmise, people will be better at solving problems of all kinds than ever before. Methods of doing things keep improving, in small and large ways. Fifty years ago, extraction of oil from the Canadian oil sands was altogether uneconomic. Today we are producing a million barrels a day, profitably.⁹ The article in question points out that known oil resources have expanded *every time* someone predicts the early demise of human use of oil. We now have much more known oil remaining than we thought we had a hundred years ago, or fifty, or even ten years ago. The example is just ne among many: it must be multiplied by hundreds. *Nothing* that we use now will surely be the same a hundred years from now. Doubtless some supply situations will be worse, but most will be enormously better, especially because they enable us to do without the increasingly scarce stuffs that we currently use for those purposes.

Judging Futures: Two Involvements

Anyone who says we are now doing things to the planet that will "spoil" it for future generations is making two kinds of judgments. One is essentially an aesthetic judgment, about the intrinsic value of the process in question - 'spoil' is an evaluative word, after all. As always, many of those judgments are disputable and disputed. Some people really like vast unoccupied wildernesses, but others do not - especially, the others who would like to occupy those areas. Parks may look nice, but car parks look even nicer to the harried commuter who needs to put his car somewhere. Readers of such complaints need to ask themselves why those "others" who need a place to live, or to park, should be forced to abide by the judgments of the savants who airily proclaim the superiority of 17th century aboriginal lifestyles.

In any case, again, the planet is very large, and a great many of those who live on it are heading for the cities, leaving the countryside more thinly occupied. The world does not want for wildernesses, and even if this or that bit of it is under consideration for mineral exploration or whatever, it's not as though *all* of it is. Those who love wilderness will be able to roam around in it for the foreseeable future, just as those who love

⁸ I have seen it said by automotive engineers that contemporary Toyotas, say, are so clean that in heavily polluted cities, their exhausts are actually cleaner than the air that went into the engines - they clean the cities up as they drive in them!

⁹ Well, it was profitable until the recent collapse in oil prices; those prices are even now rising again, and no one doubts that, as conventional resources come under pressure, they will rise quite enough that profitable production will resume.

cityscapes will have no problem finding urban environments to tramp about in. To go on as if it's got to be all one or the other is to fail to look at the world we live in.

Technology, the Future, and Costs and Benefits

But the other and fundamentally far more important consideration, is *technological*. For their claim about resource limitation or global warming etc. is that *we can't fix it*, or at a minimum that we can't hope to fix it *unless we start now* (at very high cost, of course.)

Claims of that sort about various alleged environmental disasters are common. Paul Ehrlich famously predicted, in *The Population Bomb*, that the world would see massive starvation by roughly 1980.¹⁰ It didn't happen, despite all the wars and politically imposed starvations of the 20th century. Quite the contrary: by the end of that century, despite a doubling of population *and* all those wars, the world's people were eating much more per capita than in 1950.¹¹

This puts the Green Party's platform in perspective. According to them, "... the Green Party, unlike other parties, understands the scientifically verified limits to growth set by the carrying capacity of our planet." This idea, that there *is* a "carrying capacity" of the planet, is a slogan coined by some scientists, but evidently not very well understood by them. Consider, for example, food - or, more exactly, agricultural production, which (as the Greens may have failed to take into account) is where food comes from for us humans. In 1969 or so, the amount of land it took to feed one person with the best then-current agriculture was about equal to one fairly big living room in area.¹² With that kind of agricultural technology, it would take roughly the area of New Brunswick to feed the entire world's population of that time. But by now, the figure is down to *zero* - we could feed the population of a very large building with hydroponic agriculture on one or two of its middle floors.¹³ The question of "sustainability" is thus strictly academic. The improvement in agricultural productivity since the days of the hunter-gatherer societies of our remote ancestors is on the order of 1,000,000:1.¹⁴ In short, even with currently known technology, we *can* feed a far larger population than the one we have, if indeed we ever do have that far larger population - which itself is far from certain. And there simply is no knowable reason to doubt that new ways of producing food will be discovered and perfected.

Well, what about global warming, then? Will we solve the global warming problem? First, of course, we should bear in mind that there is serious controversy whether there is such a problem, or how serious it is even if there is.¹⁵ (Maybe that needs to be said twice, just in case it bounced off some listeners. So, to repeat: it is entirely unclear whether there is a problem, and especially a problem of the kind that might be helpfully alleviated by imposing draconian measures on billions of people.) Presumably in another century or so we may know the answer to that, too; but in any case we'll know answers to the first question - how to deal with it - and these answers will be *far better* than any we have now. People will either have discovered effective and economical means of countering CO2 production without making us freeze in the dark, or we will have gone clean off sources of energy that create lots of it, or will have found ways to increase the sequestration rate of CO2 to well beyond the point where we produce it.

In the First Gulf War, Saddam's armies lit hundreds of oil wells aflame, and people said they would burn for a hundred years. In fact, they were all put out by ingenious oil-well firefighters within a few months. When the oil tanker *Valdez* foundered and emitted a huge oil spill in Alaska, claims about the permanent effects on the beaches etc. were frequently heard, and much money was spent on cleanup. Meanwhile, however, organisms that just love oil, plus lots of wave action, got into the act and cleaned up the beaches much better

¹⁰ Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Ballantyne Books, 1968)

¹¹ See Dennis Avery, "Saving the Planet with Pesticides: Increasing Food Supplies while Preserving the Earth's Biodiversity," in Ronald Bailey, editor, *The True State of the Planet* (New York: Free Press, 1995)

¹² in Colin Clark, *Population Growth and Land Use*. (NY: St. Martin's, 1967), p. 157.

¹³ Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource 2* (Princeton U. P., 1996), pp. 100-104.

¹⁴ Simon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ There is a landslide of literature on this matter. Among the most recent is also among the best:

and faster than the companies using detergents and whatnot.¹⁶ So it goes. (But bureaus and committees being expensively supported to do something about it aren't about to emphasize the futility of their own efforts by comparison with untutored nature.)

A Theorem about Futurity

We can extract a general theorem from this. Consider any alleged threat to future generations from this or that current practice.

(1) Suppose that the prediction is that if this is allowed to go on, then within a few hundred years or so the planet will be uninhabitable, or whatever.

(2) And suppose, next, that the rate at which this is all happening is such that the world doesn't look much different from one year to the next.

The usual reaction of politically active persons is to proceed on the Chicken Little principle: The sky is falling! We must Do Something!

My far more reasonable **Theorem**: under these conditions, what *we* should do *now* is **nothing**.

And this *is* a matter of *moral obligation*. We are violating the rights of most of the world's people by proceeding in the ways we do. We are robbing, and often killing,¹⁷ persons in the present for the sake of a completely under-evidenced, hypothetical benefit in the far future. The fleas we kill with our sledgehammers happen, often, to be people. And those people don't particularly appreciate the thesis that they should be sacrificed on the altars of Greenness instead of keeping warm by a fire that increases, by an almost incalculably minute amount, the average temperature of the globe.

Example: Global Warming & Ice Caps

The Global Warming scenario perfectly exemplifies this. For example, a main complaint at present is fear that the oceans will rise up and inundate coastal cities. Yet at the rate the Greenland ice cap is (or anyway, might be) melting, it will take about 800,000 years before the sea levels would endanger major cities.¹⁸ Any bets on that one?

Thus an important question is, *what's the hurry?* How much difference will it make if instead we start in fifty years, or a couple of centuries? The answer, when the dust is settled, is, generally, on the face of it virtually none. On the other hand, another fifty years or a century of intensive and intelligent research will have been invested in the topic. What we will be able to do about it if we start in fifty years' time - if it turns out that it needs to be done at all - will surely be far, far more effective than what we inefficiently do now. *But* what we (ineffectually) *do now* will certainly have extremely adverse effects on hundreds of millions or billions of people - especially, of course, the poor.

Indeed, we can up the ante quite a lot. The amount of human wellbeing that we are squandering now is so enormous that we are decreasing the likelihood that the good solutions we are sure will be found will in fact be found in the nearish future. If we expend huge amounts of money preventing people from having cheap electricity and cheap gasoline, etc., then that is money that could, and when it comes to the crunch would, be spent looking for the needed solutions, if they turn out to be needed. We are shooting ourselves in the foot, as

¹⁶ "It is widely believed, however, that wave action from winter storms did more to clean the beaches than all the human effort involved." Exxon Valdez Spill Trustee Council - <http://www.evostc.state.ak.us/facts/qanda.cfm>

¹⁷ A case in point: the insane requirement to turn much of our agricultural output into inferior automotive fuel, which has led to incredibly high prices for corn and other basics - prices that affect the world's near-starving with frequently fatal impact.

¹⁸ William Krabill et al, in *Science* 289:428-30, gives an outside estimate of 0.15 inches per year (with the likely figure much lower.) Patrick Michaels, in *Meltdown* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2004), summarizes the report on 54-63. On p. 58, the calculation of 800,000 years for complete disappearance of the ice cap is noted. As Michaels adds, we will presumably have run out of fossil fuels to burn about 798,000 years before that denouement is reached.

we shoot so many people, such as the world's poor for whom the price of needed grains has doubled due to the absurd actions of governments in subsidizing the turning of edible grains into burnable alcohol.

Two Kinds of Risk

Bruno Prior helpfully puts the point thus: What the activists of today tend to use is “the asymmetric precautionary principle, which demands precaution against the risk that today’s freedoms may harm future generations more than they benefit present generations, but opposes precaution against the risk that today’s constraints may harm present generations more than they benefit future generations.”¹⁹

That’s exemplified by today’s climate policy, as I noted: current climate scientists have estimated that the net difference to the world’s temperature that would be made by fulfilling the terms of the Kyoto Accord would be around 0.07-0.15C over fifty years. Such a reduction is trivial, but the cost it imposes on all of us is enormous. It would be *irrational to undertake by any normal standards of prudence*. The question is why such normal standards have been steamrollered in recent discussions and actions.

The moral, then, is this: unless the rate at which the evil effects are setting in is such that people in the *quite near* future can be *confidently foreseen* to be *quite adversely affected* by the problem, we should refrain from engaging, *now*, in cures that can be very confidently foreseen to affect lots of people *very adversely, now*. We should never make life a lot worse for a whole lot of known people, now, in the hope of averting a temporally distant and conjectural catastrophe. For by the time the distant future in which the catastrophe will happen rolls around, it almost certainly will not happen, either because our predictions have proven to be wrong (as such predictions invariably do), or because the clever people who will be affected by them have got down to business and figured out a good fix for them, at affordable costs. (Or, of course, because it is a catastrophe about which there really is nothing we can do. Eventually, we gather, the earth will burn to a crisp or freeze in a lump and the forces involved will outstrip anything we can possibly do to avert the disaster. But no such things are worth bothering to think about at present.) We have, in sum, far better reason for thinking in this way - viz., in favor of doing nothing, apart from more research - than for thinking that unless we start *now*, the future catastrophes are very likely to eventuate.

The Materialist Fallacy

The remote future, then, is much better left to take care of itself. There is hardly anything we can rationally do for it, apart from what will obviously be done anyway: viz., to have children we love and to bring them up as best we can. They’ll do the same with theirs, and so on. But the environment into which they’ll bring them will be overwhelmingly a product of technologies of which we currently have virtually no idea - other than that they will be much better than anything we currently have if we can even compare the two. Which, to remind just one more time, *we currently can’t*, since *we simply don’t know*.

The basic mistake in these matters is what I have previously dubbed the “materialistic fallacy.” It consists in equating *resources* with *stuff*. Oil is stuff - you can get your hands in it, and you can measure it. We know - sort of - where we stand with it.

But the trouble is, a resource is *not* just stuff. It’s stuff *you can do stuff with*. It’s *useful* matter (or useful processes). *There* is a tree in a forest; *here* is a Chippendale chair. Knowing that we have the first does not mean knowing we have the second. *There* is a desert, beneath which - unbeknownst to Early Man - lay large amounts of crude oil. Here is 2009 Jaguar sedan, making its way gracefully and swiftly along a well-made asphalt highway. Try running a Jaguar on crude oil. Try doing anything useful with crude oil in the absence of any knowledge what can be done with it.

Resources = Human Interests x Human Knowledge x Stuff

That is: something is a resource only when we have an interest that can be catered to by means of utilizing certain stuffs in discoverable ways. No discovery, no effective resources. But also: more discovery,

¹⁹ Bruno Prior, in the Foreword to Colin Robinson, ed., *Climate Change Policy: Challenging the Activists* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008), p. 12.

and a given quantum of stuff becomes a resource. To revert to another of my oft-used examples, computer chips - by many orders of magnitude the most important resource per unit of mass that we have - start out life as silicon, i.e., sand. The value of that sand, given no information, is essentially zero. The value of that computer chip, given incredible amounts of human ingenuity and information, is incalculable.

The point is that there is *no* reason for us, *now*, to try to predict how things will be for people five hundred years from now, other than that they'll be extremely different from what they are now, and, virtually certainly, enormously *better*.

So to come on in the way current politicians and so many pundits do is, in a word, silly. It is, of course, also arrogant, and fascist, and extremely, extremely detrimental to human life.

Other than that, of course, it does make for lots of fun stories in the newspapers.

Summary

This began with an argument against the view that we have (significant) duties to future generations. It then segued into an argument against the view that, even if we did have such duties, we should infer that we need, *now*, to try to *do something* about them - especially, the sort of somethings that governments do, namely impose large costs on innocent civilians in order to fund "programs" to get to work on them. The things we do now will be magnificently ineffectual so far as their intended good purposes are concerned, but their costs will be dramatically evident to the people who bear them (namely, all of us.)

The general point, then, is that we should resist the urge to "do" those things. Spending some of our money on research is a good idea, but spending the rest of it on trips to the Uffizi or to Nepal is recommended.

Don't feel guilty about that - you're doing the right thing!