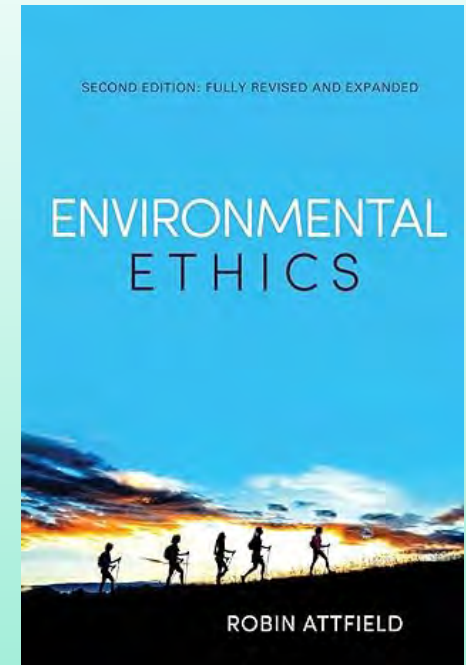


TAKING THE FUTURE SERIOUSLY

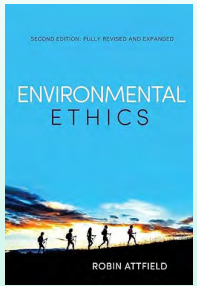
Chapter 4.
Robin Attfield
Environmental Ethics
2nd Edition 2014

A review by
Derek Linney



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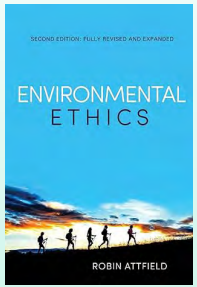
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A COMMENT ABOUT THE BOOK OVERALL

Attfield's approach is, in many ways, to present a comprehensive survey of the prevailing theories of environmental ethics and their strengths and weaknesses.

Although he does propose some normative positions, I find it hard to crystalise these from the volume of commentary and analysis within the text.

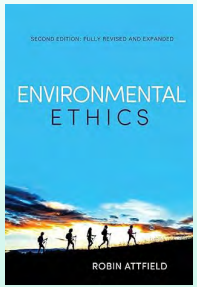


A NOTE ON WHAT FOLLOWS

Normal font is, generally, content
expressed by Attfield

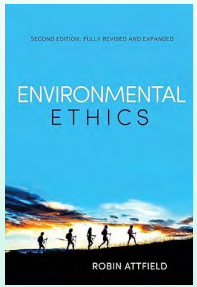
Italicised font is my commentary

TOPICS



- Future scenarios
- Limits of obligation – preventing harm vs. improving quality of life
- Extending the distance-dimension regarding our obligations to other people to the time-dimension.
- How ethical theories accommodate future persons
- Discounting future benefits / costs
- Environmental Aesthetics
- Human vs. Environmental Interests
- Current vs. Future Interests
- Representing future generations in decision making forums

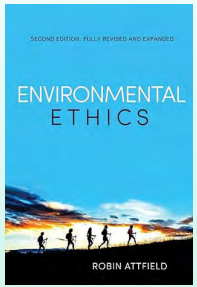
FUTURE SCENARIOS



Potential futures:

- **Extinction of humanity through man-made or natural disaster**
 - Nuclear war, biological warfare etc.
 - Pandemic, asteroid impact etc.
- **Population growth**
 - Sustainable vs. unsustainable
 - Future where resource depletion leads to a declining quality of life for human and non-human inhabitants of Earth
 - Biodiversity threat from demand for food production / living space
- **Perpetuation (*or increase*) of inequalities**

Note: In considering future scenarios it is worth considering that the Earth could remain habitable for between 500M and 1.3B years

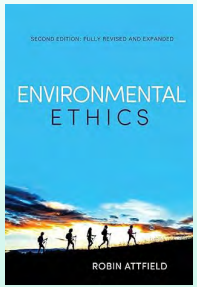


SCOPE OF OUR OBLIGATIONS

Two main approaches

- **Prevent Harm**
 - E.g. how we deal with nuclear waste
 - Avoid catastrophic climate change
- **Provide for a better quality of life**
 - Avoid resource depletion
 - Take early action to minimise future impacts and maximise future benefits

Uncertainty about the future is not an excuse for failure to act

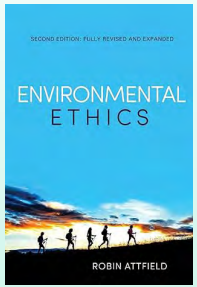


EXTENDING OUR OBLIGATIONS TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

How do different ethical theories treat future persons?

- **Consequentialism**
 - Can fairly easily be extended to consider future generations
- **Kantian Deontology**
 - Can be extended, within limits, to future generations
 - There is a major challenge in interpreting the “rights” of potential (i.e. not yet born) persons
- **Rawlsian and other Contractarian theories**
 - Major difficulty in incorporating future persons who cannot participate in the “contract”

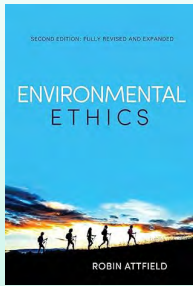
OBLIGATIONS ARE SYMMETRIC WITH REGARD TO DISTANCE AND TIME



Consequentialist & Rights Based theories (with some caveats) would lead to the conclusion that, generally, there is a symmetry between geographic and temporal distance.

Just as we have responsibilities to persons geographically distanced from us, we have responsibilities towards temporally distant persons.

Note: most theories need some adaptation to allow some preference for immediate family members and close generations (children / grandchildren)



DISCOUNTING

Attfield discusses “Discounting” of future impacts

Discounting is common in economics to reflect the common view that something in the hand today is worth more than that same thing in the future.

It reflects three assumed aspects of value:

- a) Assets today can be used to generate greater return in the future (investment)*
- b) Immediate satisfaction is generally preferred over future satisfaction (consumption)*
- c) If wealth increases over time, then the marginal benefit of a thing of a fixed monetary value will be perceived as of less valuable in the future (relative wealth)*

Discounting often means that benefits or costs 30-50 years into the future are reduced to insignificance.

These don't seem justified when dealing with the legacy that we leave for future generations.

DISCOUNTING

But

Without discounting then £101 pounds in 30 years' time would be considered of greater value to me than £100 today.

The sheer numbers of future persons, let alone post-human beings, means that without discounting then we are faced with a situation where we should massively favour the future at the expense of our present situation.

Without discounting then:

- *If there will be 1000 future persons (over time) for every current person alive*
- *If each of us giving up 50% of our current utility would increase each of their utility by only 0.1%*

then

- *We should give up that 50% of our current utility.*

Consider:

- *Humans are mammals*
- *A typical lifespan of a mammalian species is about 1 million years.*
- *Assume the population stabilizes at 11 billion people*
- *Assume life expectancy stabilises at an average 88 years*
- *If humanity exists for 1 million years: 200,000 years are already behind us, so there would be 800,000 years still ahead.*

- *In such a future, there would be 100,000 billion people alive at some point of the next 800,000 years.**

** Source: Our World in Data – The Future is Vast*

OBLIGATIONS OVER DISTANCE AND TIME

Going back to the issue of distance / time symmetry:

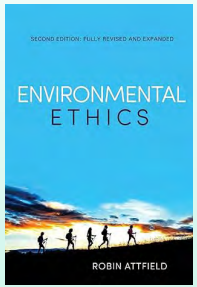
*Even without regard to the future, we tend, in practice, to see our obligations diminishing with respect to physical distance.**

I believe we exercise a form of distance-related discounting.

The further away a person is (familiially, socially or geographically) the more we discount (ignore) their needs

It would be surprising if the same were not to be true with regard to future time.

* See Singer for refutation of the ethics of this position



THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

If we believe there is a duty to preserve artistic beauty
then

There is a duty to preserve [the beauty of] nature.

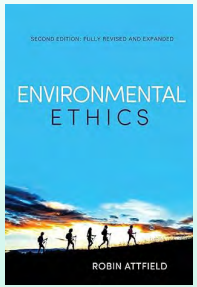
Carlson proposes rules of environmental aesthetics:

- Not anthropocentric
- Not “scenery” obsessed
- Serious not superficial (based on reality of nature)
- Objective – *an interesting challenge when discussing aesthetics*
- Need moral engagement [in what should be preserved]

Attfield challenges these by considering:

- The interaction of nature with poetry and music
- The need to be involved with nature
- How TV programmes can instil a consideration of nature.

However, I do find Attfield here is in danger of romanticising nature.



HUMAN VS. ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Norton's *Convergence Claim* suggests that we do not need a non-anthropocentric ethics

as what is in the interest of humans in the long term is also to the benefit of nature.

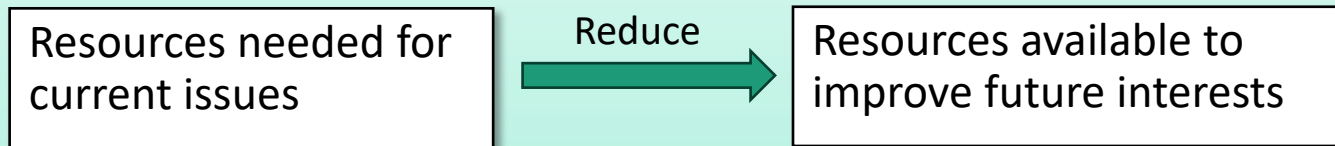
If we do what is right for our children and their children then nature will benefit.

Attfield disagrees:

- Actions in Humans' best interests are probably detrimental in the post-human period
- Need to consider non-humans' interests, even where they have no visibility or interaction with humans, in order to preserve them
- Economic & scientific human interests are not strong enough to conserve species and habitats

Attfield cautions, when discussing invasive species and habitat restoration that ecosystems are dynamic and not some static model that prevailed before human interference and to which they can be returned.

CURRENT VS. FUTURE INTERESTS



Environmental Injustice

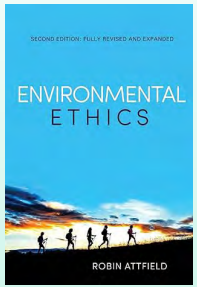
Actions taken for current interests too often favour the rich at the expense of disadvantaged groups – both now and into the future

Environmental Racism

Actions taken now for the benefit of the rich (nations and sections of society) too often have negative effects that fall on Third World countries and on racially disadvantaged groups in society.

Attfield discusses this largely in relation to toxic waste.

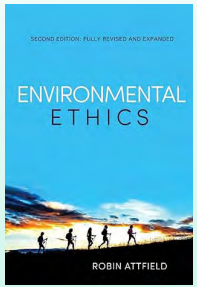
He doesn't mention, in this section, climate change which seems to me to be a prime example of this process.



REPRESENTING THE INTERESTS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

Is there a need to provide representation of the interests of future persons in decision making forums?

- a) *United Nations*
- b) *Parliament*
- c) *Cabinet - a “Minister for Future Generations”*
- d) *Environmental Regulators*



SOME COMMENTS

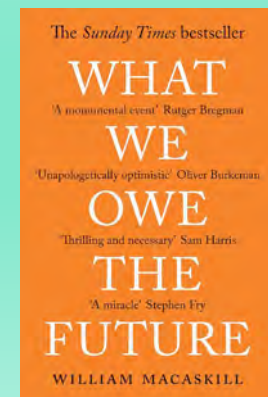
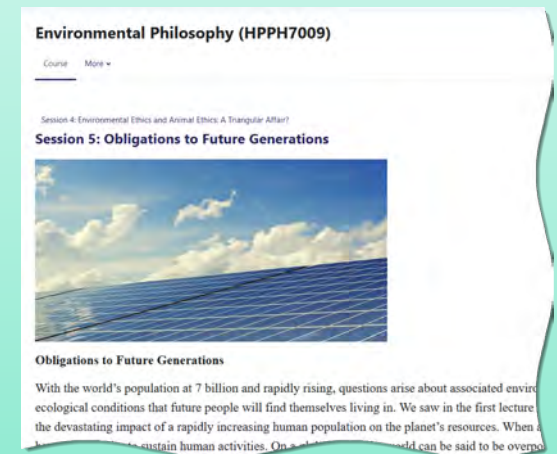
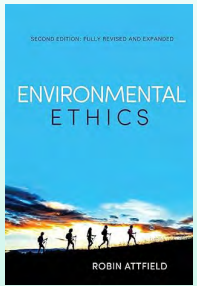
- *Attfield's view, despite talking about non-humans' interests, is largely anthropocentric in this chapter.*
- *There is no consideration of what applies if a "superior" intelligence – biological, alien or mechanical – were to supersede mankind: what if anything do we owe them?*
- *While one can follow the logic of our obligations towards the future one does have to inject a note of realism:*
 - *We struggle to act in our own longer term interests so there are difficulties in acting for the benefit of future generations*
 - *Is a democratic government, with its election cycles, compatible with very long term planning and investment?*

SUMMARY

Attfield provides an excellent introduction to the subject and literature of taking the future seriously, but it is a complex, difficult topic.

Rebekah's module notes (Obligations to Future Generations) are, to my mind, a more readable introduction to the topic.

*For a somewhat different approach, I can highly recommend William MacAskill's **What We Owe The Future**.*



THE END



Thank You for Listening