ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

OBLIGATIONS TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

Introduction

With the world's population at 7 billion and rapidly rising, questions arise about associated environmental problems and about the social, economic and ecological conditions that future people will find themselves living in. We saw in the first lecture that Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, warned of the devastating impact of a rapidly increasing human population on the planet's resources. When an area becomes overpopulated, the environment may no longer have the capacity to sustain human activities. On a global scale, the world can be said to be overpopulated when the population size cannot be maintained indefinitely without depleting resources, without degrading the environment, and without having a negative impact on people's well-being and on the world's nonhuman inhabitants. Because we are rapidly using up resources around the world, virtually all nations could be considered to be overpopulated. As we use up the resources, the earth's carrying capacity continues to decrease. And if we are concerned about the quality of life of future people, rather than the mere quantity of persons, we must consider the negative impacts the growing population will have on the environment and its future inhabitants.

In the light of all these issues, many environmental philosophers claim that the current generation have obligations to act in a way that pays heed to the interests of future people: arguing that, for example, we should attempt to stabilize population levels and use resources in a sustainable manner. Of course, this claim assumes that we have obligations to future people. But do we have such obligations? Most people would say that we do. But if so, on what basis? And what sense does it make to say that we have obligations to people who do not exist and so are not now identifiable persons? Further, if we think that certain states of affairs are intrinsically valuable (see lectures one and two) and should be optimised where possible, what implications does this have with regard to future people and population issues? These and related issues will be the focus of the discussion in this lecture.

Part 1: Communitarian and Contractarian Theories

Golding's narrow communitarianism

Narrow communitarianism is a stance that holds that our obligations are confined to those who share or will share in the same community as ourselves. This view is taken by Martin Golding. In his article 'Obligations to Future Generations' (1981), he states that obligations to future people are distinct from obligations to current people, and further claims that since we share a 'common life' with our most immediate descendents, i.e., children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, we should not consider such people in the same category as future people who are unknown to us. Only people who are beyond our immediate descendents, then, are classed are future generations in a relevant sense (Golding, 1981, pp.61-62).

Golding talks about different kinds of moral communities. There are two ways in which we usually think moral communities are formed: (1) by explicit contract, and (2) by an implicit social arrangement from which members derive direct mutual benefits. However, a moral community of ourselves and future people cannot be formed in either of these ways. We cannot enter into a contract with the community of future people, and although future people can be benefited by us, this benefit cannot be reciprocated (ibid., p.65). A moral community, Golding goes on to say, could also be formed with those to whom we have 'altruistic impulses and fellow feeling' (ibid., p.66). This option is quickly rejected by Golding as an option that would enable us to include future people as part of a moral community because he believes that altruistic sentiments are not a sufficient basis on which to generate a moral community (ibid., p.66).

Other notable points Golding makes are that if what is necessary to form a community with future people is a sense of a shared life, it becomes apparent that the more distant in the future people are, the less likely we are to form such a community, and so less likely we are to have obligations. (He notes that when he says 'more distant' he does not necessarily mean very distant.) Moreover, the more distant the generation, the less likely we have obligations to promote the good of its members. The further we look to the future, the less we can know about what people will want (that is, what goods we might be obliged to ensure are still available). Because of this lack of knowledge, it may be that what we might think is good will turn out to be bad. And given this ignorance, perhaps we are obliged to do nothing, so as to avoid doing something that will end up being contrary to their good (ibid., p.70).

But Golding's view ignores the fact that even if future people are not part of a community of present people, they will still have basic human needs; needs which this view disregards.

The consecutive chain of obligations

John Passmore also holds a communitarian stance with regard to future people, arguing that there should be a consecutive chain of obligations, and our obligations are primarily to our immediate successors and depend on what we love and want to see continued. I, for example, will have obligations to my children, and you will have obligations to your children, and

each generation has an obligation to the next based on their love of their offspring. Indirectly, we have obligations to later generations to keep this chain of obligations in place, but directly our obligations are to immediate posterity only (Passmore, 1980, pp.87-91).

But what if the chain suffers a weak link? And what about other people's successors? (This view states that we have obligations only to *our* successors.) And the Routleys argue (in 'Nuclear Energy and Obligations to the Future') that direct obligations to distant future people are needed in order to handle those actions which do not affect people in the immediate future but actually have a delayed impact and would turn out to be disastrous for more distant people (1978).

O'Neill's broader communitarianism

John O'Neill (1993) presents a broader communitarian approach than those presented above. He says that our duties to the future comprise undertaking achievements that future people can complete, and passing on values to ensure that there will be a community between future people and us. As he says, 'our primary responsibility is to attempt, as far as possible, to ensure that future generations do belong to a community with ourselves—that they are capable, for example, of appreciating works of science and art, the goods of the nonhuman environment, and the worth of the embodiments of human skills, and are capable of contributing to these goods. This is an obligation not only to future generations, but also to the past… and to the present… so that we do not… undermine our own achievements by rendering impossible our own success' (O'Neill, 1993, p.34). So we are to pass on our values, ensuring that there will be a community between future people and us.

This sounds plausible but there are surely responsibilities to future generations based on the interests of those generations themselves. So his list of responsibilities sounds right, but is non-exhaustive—in other words, there will no doubt be other responsibilities to future generations of which John O'Neill's approach does not take account.

Rawlsian contractarianism

John Rawls has also attempted to account for obligations to posterity**.** Before we discuss how he does this, we would do well to briefly outline Rawlsian contractarianism. Rawlsian contractarianism is the theory that a system of rules of justice chosen behind a 'veil of ignorance' by rational beings would be a just and fair one. The rational beings would lack any knowledge of their own interests or preferences (hence the term 'veil of ignorance'), and so the rules chosen would be supposedly impartial ([1972]1999, pp.118-26). For Rawls, contracting individuals in the original position of the veil of ignorance do have some general knowledge of human society, including knowledge about economics, psychology and social organisation. What they do not have is more specific knowledge, including knowledge of their own mental or physical capacities, knowledge of their own ideas of what counts as a good life, knowledge of their own economic place in society, or knowledge of the particular features of their society. Also the parties to the contract will not know what their mental and physical capacities will be once deliberations of justice have been made (ibid., pp.118-19). They have no knowledge of their own position or prospects. As contractors they should

strive to create a society that is just and fair, if not for everyone else then at least for themselves, for it may be that they are in, or end up in, a disadvantaged position in society.

Rawls went on to modify the original position so as to make his choosers concerned for their successors. (This appears an arbitrary device to enable his framework to support justice between generations.) To attempt to provide for obligations to future people, Rawls requires that contractors select what he calls a 'just savings principle' whereby each generation must ensure that the next generation receives resources equivalent to those they themselves received (ibid., pp.251-58). But this principle appears inoperable if population sizes change radically. Changes to the environment, including climatic changes, could also make this principle difficult to implement in practice. But there is a further problem. Those in the original position do not even have ties with family or friends let alone other successors, yet it is assumed that they are somehow able to care about the next generation (Attfield, 2012, p.117)

Rawlsian contractarians have tried to get around this problem by saying that contractors are somehow representative of all the generations that there will be. But as Attfield has argued, this proposal is problematic, because the rules of justice made by the contractors will 'make a difference to how long humanity survives and thus to how many generations there will be'. It cannot be known how many generations there will be before the contractors begin to make decisions from the original position, but this fact would have to be known if all the generations that there will be are to be represented (Attfield, 2012, p.177). In other words, revisionist Rawlsians place representatives of each generation in the original position so that the just savings principle can be reached in a less arbitrary manner—but because they would be choosing how many generations there shall be, this scenario cannot get off the ground, for it is unknown which generations will exist and should be represented.

We should also be aware that Rawls's contractarianism excludes animals from deserving fair treatment. This is because they are unable to enter into a contract, whereby questions of justice are answered by those who are rational in their decision-making, and can make deliberations of justice behind 'a veil of ignorance' (Rawls, 1999, pp.118-23). For Rawls, only humans can be represented in the sphere of justice, humans being the only species capable of moral agency and of a sense of justice. Since animals lack a sense of justice they are excluded from being beneficiaries of principles of justice (Rawls, 1999, pp.442 and 448). But the very fact that at least sentient animals, both present and future ones, are capable of or will be capable of being harmed and benefited provides a good reason for including such animals in the sphere of justice, since they can be or will be affected for better or for worse by human deliberations in matters of justice, including the distribution of goods and benefits.

Barry's contractarianism

Brian Barry suggests that any decent contract would involve fairness between generations, such that any generation deprived of resources by their predecessors would be compensated and provided with matching opportunities. He believes that the exploitation of non-renewable resources raises a special problem in relation to international equity. The reason for this is that many non-renewable resources will not be available in the future (fossil fuels, minerals, energy resources, etc.). In order to promote intergenerational equality between generations, he believes that we must think of a way to allow for some exploitation of such resources now, while compensating for a lack of such resources for future generations (Barry, 1991, pp.259-267). Barry suggests that compensation would involve ensuring matching opportunities in the form of technological advances and capital investment 'to offset the effects of depletion' (ibid., p.260).

But ensuring matching opportunities may be beyond the power of the predecessors who should plausibly maximise benefits among generations, whether equally or not. Besides, some obligations concern the distant future, and it would be impossible on the fairness approach to ensure that future people have equal opportunities to our own—largely because of factors beyond present control and factors unknown.

In spite of the specific objections raised to the approaches outlined above, some of these approaches give rise to valuable suggestions about the content of obligations with regard to future generations. They also impinge on obligations about population. If each generation is to have like opportunities, none must be too large, nor must the sizes of each generation differ too greatly for earlier ones to make provision for later ones.

A further evaluation, uncertainty, and consequentialism

We have seen that Golding uses our ignorance of what goods future people will need as an additional reason for restricting obligations to those who share our community, thus ignoring the fact that future people who are not part of our community will still have basic human needs. And while Barry believes that there should be fairness between generations, we have seen that uncertainty about the distant future poses a problem for his contractarianism. Attfield argues that ignorance of the future is not so much of a problem for consequentialists 'concerned with optimising the foreseeable outcomes of current actions, policies and institutions' (Attfield, 1999, p.83). Rather than being concerned with promoting equal distribution of goods across generations and centuries, 'consequentialists seek (in the light of current knowledge and uncertainty) to make the greatest foreseeable difference to the balance of value of disvalue, and to promote practices which (in the light of available information) will foreseeably have this kind of overall impact' (ibid., p.83). For Attfield a greater difference will be made by ensuring that basic needs are met, and, as such, satisfying basic needs should be prioritised for each generation (ibid., p.83).

We have already outlined some problems that are specific to the communitarian and contractarian approaches outlined above. We would do well here to note a problem that applies to all these approaches. They make obligations dependent on some sort of relationship based on an agreement or contract, or on voluntary participation in the community, or on relationships based on love or reciprocity, but, as Attfield claims, such

relations could not hold between people widely separated in time (Attfield, 2003, p.102), and so all these approaches implicitly imply that there is no direct obligation to take into account the interests of people in the distant future. Attfield argues that

> [W]e have no need to know whether the manufacture has made agreements with the bus passengers or participates in or loves one or another community in order to be assured of his having responsibilities towards distant members of the traveling public. Hence future-related obligations should not be represented as contingent on the existence of contracts, or on participation in communities (as communitarians hold), or an emotional attachments. It could be granted here that such relationships sometimes supply people's motivation to care about the future (or at least the near future), whether through a sense of fairness and a wish to pass on to others benefits received by yourself, or through dedication to valued communal practices that you hope will outlive you, or through love of our children and grandchildren. But future-related obligations cannot be supposed to depend on such matters, or people with few relationships would have few (if any) future-related responsibilities or obligations, contrary to our reactions to… the bus analogy' (ibid., p.102).

Certain relations, then, based on, for example, love or contracts, can motivate people to care about future generations, but such relations are not necessary for us to have obligations to future people, for then people who have few relationships would have few responsibilities with regard to future generations. And although people in the distant future cannot be held to have certain relations with people in the present or enter into contract with them, they nevertheless will have interests that can be affected for better or for worse by the actions of the present generation, and this provides us with a reason for saying that we have obligations to them. In contrast to the aforementioned approaches, consequentialist considerations would require us to take into account the consequences of actions which, although do not affect the present generations or the immediate future, would have a delayed impact and would be very bad for more distant people, and would require us to do so irrespective of our lack of certain relations with distant people.

It has, however, been said that a consequentialist approach to intergenerational equity provides little guidance in relation to how we should act now to best promote the interests of people in the future. But Attfield rejects this as implausible, stressing the importance of planning for the foreseeable needs of future people, including energy needs, and the need for water and food, for example. And the fact that we will never know for certain whether our present planning will be a success does not make it implausible to conduct such planning by, for example, implementing policies on the basis of the probability of the present to affect future people. Nor does the fact that we will never know for certain whether such policies will be successful make consequentialism an implausible approach to intergenerational equity (Attfield, 2003, p.104).

It has also been suggested that deontological principles could best serve intergenerational equity by putting forward principles that require equal opportunities for future generations, as Brian Barry has attempted to do. But Attfield plausibly claims that, in light of our ignorance of future circumstances, principles requiring equal opportunities in the sense of matching opportunities could not be delivered in practice, and could

probably not even be delivered *within* countries, let alone worldwide (ibid., p.104). Instead of attempting to ensure fairness between generations by attempting to provide them with matching opportunities, Attfield appeals to the principle of equal consideration of interests as a principle that can best take account of the interests of future people: 'Issues of equity are more adequately captured by giving equal consideration to equal interests, present or future interests, in so far as those interests are foreseeable, and devising policies on this basis' (ibid., p.104). (For more on the principle of equal consideration of interests, see the following paper in which Peter Singer well explains the principle of equal consideration of interests: Singer, 'All Animals are Equal', in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, eds. Michael E. Zimmerman et al (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998). This is part of the reading for lecture two.)

Part 2: An Alternative Approach: The Total View, Future People and Population

An introduction to the total view

One important issue arising from the above discussions is whether we have an obligation to future people whoever they may be, or whether we have an obligation to identifiable people only. Another equally important issue is whether we should favour quality of life over quantity of life when it comes to present and future people. Central to such issues are two views: the total view and prior existence view. Such views are often discussed within environmental ethics in relation to questions concerning obligations to future people, as well as in relation to population ethics. In this section and the next one we will focus on a discussion of these two views. Let us first consider the total view.

The total view is a consequentialist theory that states we should promote the total balance of whatever makes life worthwhile (whether that is happiness, pleasure, flourishing or well-being). Consequentialist theories, of course, are concerned with promoting the best consequences and increasing that which is considered to be of value in the world. For example, utilitarianism, as a variety of consequentialism, argues that we should promote those actions that produce the greatest amount of pleasure or happiness over pain or unhappiness. Relatedly, we can define the total view as follows:

> The normative consequentialist theory holding that agents should optimise the total (rather than the average) balance of whatever makes life worthwhile over whatever detracts from it, in terms of the full range of foreseeable consequences of action and inaction (Attfield, 2003, p.201).

Now, all supporters of the total view, whatever their value theory (i.e. wherever they locate value, in worthwhile life, in pleasure or in happiness), can be charged with saying that it follows from their views that we should actively seek to increase the total amount of whatever makes life worthwhile. I say 'charged' since is it thought that what follows from their views has serious implications with respect to population ethics and in relation to future people, with critics arguing that it commits them to advocating overpopulation (or at least

higher population levels) and purposely generating more human lives. The reason for this is that each additional life would add to the total value in the world, whether to the total happiness or to the total amount of worthwhile life.

The repugnant conclusion

One question population ethicists are concerned with is how many people there should be. They would also ask whether it is better to create more lives of lower quality, or whether we should focus on increasing the quality of the lives of the people who already live. As suggested above, the total view has—what are thought to be—unwelcome implications relevant to these issues. In order to look at the implications let us now turn to Derek Parfit's articulation of the problem (in *Reasons and Persons*, 1986, Part 4).

Let us imagine a world and let us call that world 'A'. Now this world contains 7 billion people, each enjoying a high quality of life, each being very happy, and each having a good level of well-being. Now, let us imagine another world, called 'B'. In B there are 14 billion people (so there are double the number of people in A) each enjoying slightly over half the level of happiness / well-being of the people in A. Now, although the people in B are worse off than the people in A, it could be argued that B is the better world, as there are more people in this world, each of whom have a life worth living or a reasonable quality of life, albeit a quality of life which is lower than the quality of life of people in A. The important point to recognise is that, for B, while the average level of happiness, utility or well-being is only slightly more than half of A, B still contains the greater *total* quantity of happiness, well-being or utility, because B contains the greatest total number of lives worth living (Parfit, 1986, p.385).

Now, the total view says that we should increase the total balance of whatever makes life worthwhile, and on the total view, B is better than A. This is all well and good, and does not pose too much of problem at this stage. There are many people in B, all with lives worth living and we could say all with a decent quality of life. As such, there is more value in B than in A. But problems—or what are argued to be problems—appear when one delves a bit deeper into the implications of the total view.

So let us start to delve a little deeper by imagining a world called 'C'. This world contains, say, 30 billion people, each enjoying slightly more than half of the utility, well-being, or happiness of those people in B. On the total view, C is better than B. Now, remember that the total view says that we should optimise or maximise the total balance of what makes life worthwhile. So, on the total view, we should prefer C rather than B. Although there are many more people in C, each with a lower quality of life than B, they still have those things in life than make life worthwhile—let us assume, for example, that they still have the ability to exercise their capacities and potentialities and so forth, but there might be worse housing, environmental problems would no doubt be dire, there would be an extremely high level of pollution with very bad air quality, and people would be living in overcrowded conditions and so on.

Now this scenario of different worlds can be repeated until we arrive at an even larger population. Let us call that world 'Z', and let say that it contains 60 billion people. Now, on the total view, just as B would be better than A, and C would be better B, Z would be better than C. In fact, Z would be the best world. Z however has a massive population. Each person has a quality of life that is barely worth living—it is worth living, but only just. Because Z contains a greater total quantity of worthwhile life, utility, or happiness than any of the other worlds, then, on the Total View, Z is the best world of all. But to say that Z is better than A is highly counterintuitive, to say the least (Parfit, 1986, p.388).

We have now reached what is known as the repugnant conclusion, which is as follows:

> [F]or any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living (ibid., p.388).

The name 'the repugnant conclusion' of course suggests that this conclusion is very hard to accept. In reflecting on this conclusion, supporters of the total view have been accused of advocating overpopulation and of advocating generating people in order to increase the total value in the world even when we know those people will have a poor quality of life.

Is the 'repugnant conclusion' really repugnant?

One might think that the problems raised by the total view are a problem for consequentialists alone. But for all those who think that we have some obligation to promote human welfare, happiness or whatever makes life worthwhile, they too could be faced with same problems, even without being consequentialists. Indeed, 'The Repugnant Conclusion is a problem for all moral theories which hold that welfare at least matters when all other things are equal' (Arrhenius et al, 2010).

So what might we say in response to the repugnant conclusion? It has been argued that the total view need not imply the repugnant conclusion. There are a number of reasons for this. Richard Hare argues that a severe increase in population could easily take away from people that which makes life worth living. There could be such a loss of countryside and open spaces that we would loose our ability to even move away from people, an ability that that most of us value. Hare claims that we are free to say that if this were to happen then existence would not be worth having (Hare, 1993, pp. 74-75; and Attfield, 1995, p.164). But supporters of the total view would only commend an increase in population if life would be worth living for most people. Hence supporters of the total view need not be committed to advocating an increase in population to such an extent that it would result in severe overcrowding and a loss of those things we value in life, such as having the space to move away from people (see Attfield, 1995, p.164). It is reasonable to argue, as Attfield does, that the good of not having to live in a severely overcrowded environment and the good of being able to move about freely are goods which, although not intrinsically valuable, 'are for most people contingently and empirically necessary for the continuing ability to develop and exercise essential capacities, and thus for life to remain worth living' (Attfield, 1995, p.164)

(For Attfield, our flourishing is intrinsically valuable and consists in exercising such capacities (see lecture two).)

Indeed, we should be aware that whether the implications of the total view are repugnant will involve thinking about what is deemed a worthwhile life. Consider that what is required for a minimally worthwhile life might actually be quite a lot—much more than the repugnant conclusion has allowed for. For example, for Attfield a worthwhile human life involves 'the development, in some degree, of most essential capacities' (ibid., p.75), including, for example, capacities for autonomy, perception, practical reason, and self-creation. And importantly, 'what does most to make life worthwhile is the satisfaction of basic needs' (ibid., p.172). Now, when we look at what a worthwhile life minimally involves for Attfield (that is, the development of certain essential human capacities) and when we consider that 'a quality of life no lower than this is required for basic needs to be met and for life to be worthwhile, the repugnant conclusion (which only applies where worthwhile human lives are lived) is not recognisably repugnant, and Parfit's depiction of it… misrepresents what the concept of minimal worthwhileness involves' (Attfield, 2014). In addition, if we take Attfield's view that the satisfaction of basic needs is essential to a worthwhile life, as well as consider that any significant increase in the world's population is likely to add to the already massive number of people whose basic needs are not met (rather than add to the total balance of worthwhile lives over lives over miserable ones), then the total view does not require increases to the current population.

Moreover, saying that the total view advocates overpopulation or implies the repugnant conclusion omits an argument about our dependence for a worthwhile life on intact ecosystems—ecosystems which would be undermined by overpopulation—and also fails to take into account the value of nonhuman future beings whose habitats would be destroyed by human population. The ecological stress would be huge; so huge as to be unjustifiable. Indeed, consequentialists are free to take into account the impacts of population increases on nonhuman beings, habitats, and ecosystems. With the world's population already at 7 billion, further increases are likely to push many species to the brink of extinction, as well as result in further tracts of nature being destroyed or degraded. In the light of factors such as these, the total view need not advocate population increases, at least for as long as planet Earth is the only planet that is habitable, for such increases would not be in the overall interests of present and future beings, both human and nonhuman ones (Attfield, 2012, p.188). There is then good reason to doubt that the repugnant conclusion applies to the world as it actually is.

The total view and human extinction

When we consider the environmental impacts of human action, we may consider that the extinction of the human race is a serious possibility. Global warming in particular poses massive threats to humanity. As such, the threat of human extinction is something that cannot be completely disregarded. Most people would intuitively regard the extinction of the human race (and of other sentient species, although here we will be focusing on human beings) as an evil. We might try to account for this intuition by appealing to the value of the continuation of shared and individual human activities, the curtailment of which would make our efforts and activities now and in the future seem meaningless. Indeed, the prospect that

humanity could be prematurely eradicated could deprive many activities of their meaning (Attfield, 1999, ch.4).

However, perhaps there are other reasons to account for our intuitions. Advocates of the total view maintain that future people have moral standing. Future people have standing even though their existence depends on current generations and even when they are unidentifiable. The good or harm of people who could be brought into existence count as reasons for or against actions which could bring them into being. This does not mean that we have an obligation to go about having children, especially in the light of overpopulation problems on the planet and of scarce resources, and we should consider that extra people could well lead to misery for current and future ones. It does, however, mean that each life likely to be of positive value gives us reason for valuing the existence of that life.

On the total view it also follows that humanity should not be allowed to become extinct, even if in the coming generations of human beings there were some lives of negative value or not worth living, providing that, overall, the lives of the coming generations are of positive value and outweigh the negative value of the minority of lives. There are of course some people who think that preventing misery should always be prioritised, and they will have to take the view than human extinction should be at least tolerated.

Robin Attfield provides a modified version of John Leslie's thought-experiment as a way of testing our intuitions with regard to whether the extinction of human beings would be wrong (Attfield, 1999, pp.69-70; Leslie, 1996, pp.180-83). Let us imagine numerous inhabited planets, and each of these planets is capable of supporting a large human population the majority of which would have lives of positive value. Now, let us further imagine that we can cause people to exist on each of the planets by waving a magic wand, but that among these people there will be one person on each of the planets who will have a bad life of negative value. Should we do this? For the consequentialist who believes in optimising intrinsic value over disvalue, and counts future people as having moral standing, the answer is 'Yes', we should do this, even though the population on each planet will contain a life of negative value. For those who think that preventing misery is always more important than creating value, and prioritise the prevention of misery, they will have to hold that the answer as to whether we should cause the people to exist on each planet will depend on whether the individual life of negative value on each planet could be prevented; if it can't be prevented, then the planets should not be populated.

So how does this thought experiment have a bearing on human extinction? Well, the future of planet Earth is in some ways similar to the situation in the thought-experiment (Attfield, 1999, p.70). The current population could produce a larger population, the majority of which would have lives worth living, but at the risk of some lives being of negative value. Now, if nothing counts but the preventing of misery, and if such prevention should be prioritised, the fact that the majority of this population will have worthwhile lives or will have lives of happiness does not count as a reason for creating such a population. If the prevention of misery is prioritised then allowing for the extinction of the human race is something we have an obligation to do (ibid., p.70). However, as John Leslie claims, the existence of a massive number of lives in which the majority have worthwhile lives and only one person has a life

of negative value, is not a moral disaster, even where the misery of the one person could not be alleviated (Attfield 1999, p.70; and Leslie, 1996, p.181). (Where it could be alleviated then we would have an obligation to try to ensure that it was.) For Leslie, happy lives count positively, and if happy lives count positively, then human extinction should be avoided.

Leslie claims that the situation in the hypothetical example is not logically impossible nor entirely unrealistic: 'It might be protested that all this has nothing to do with real life, our planet being so heavily populated that adding more people would result only in misery for everyone. However, it seems to me that real life could soon present us with a moral question interestingly similar to that of whether to populate those… islands. If the human race manages to survive for the next couple of centuries, it will quite possibly be in a position to start spreading right across its galaxy. It could have a strong duty to do so… the more happy people the better' (Leslie, 1996, p.183). (Leslie, of course, supports the total view in arguing that happy future lives count. Other advocates of the total view include Richard Hare and R. I. Sikora.)

Another way to present the thought-experiment is to say that there are many planets, each with a small number of miserable lives. What would be better—increasing the number of flourishing, happy lives on the planet, at the risk of increasing further the number of miserable lives, or just letting that planet continue as it is with a few lives of negative value and with those lives fading into extinction in the near future? Advocates of the total view who locate intrinsic value in flourishing or happiness would say that it would be better to increase the number of flourishing or happy lives on the planet at the risk of a small increase in the number of lives of negative value.

John Leslie's thought-experiment brings out the value of each worthwhile life; this helps explain why the extinction of humanity would be so appalling, while another reason lies in the value of the continuation of shared human activities (see Attfield, 1999, ch.4). The total view supports planning for the foreseeable needs of coming generations. And it supports the belief that our obligations include there being neither too few human beings (extinction) nor too many (overpopulation). These obligations impinge on each other; if there are likely to be 8 billion before the population stabilises, we ought to plan for the needs of 8 billion, given the total view, even if we also believe (perhaps also on the basis of the total view) that there should only be 6.5 billion or 7 billion.

Part 3: The Non-Identity of Future People and the Person-Affecting Principle

The non-identity problem

It is certainly recognised that we have obligations with regard to future generations, and most would agree that our obligations to future people extend as far into the future as the impacts of current actions. But, we might ask, to whom exactly do we have these obligations? Are the future people concerned actually ones that we can harm or benefit? There arises a problem here, a problem that has become known as the non-identity problem.

The problem can be outlined as follows. Beyond the individuals who have already been conceived or who have been born, different individuals will come into existence depending on different social policies adopted . The reason for this is that different social policies will affect which people will meet and mate, as well as the number of people that will come into existence. As Derek Parfit says, 'How may of us can truly claim, 'Even if railways and motor cars had never been invented, I would still have been born'?' (1986, p.361). Also, the identity of people will depend on the timing of conception—putting off conception or bringing it forward will bring about different people: 'You were conceived at a certain time. It is in fact true that, if you had not been conceived within a month of that time, you would never have existed' (ibid., p.355). Thus, bar people who have already been conceived, the identity of future people is not yet determined. Since future generations do not in fact exist, there are no future people to whom we could have obligations. So it seems that we can have no obligations to future people. These reflections have led some to adopt the person-affecting principle, which says that we only have obligations to actual people that already exist.

The person-affecting principle

The person-affecting principle can be defined as follows:

> The normative theory that confines moral standing to people and creatures which either exist already or are going to exist whatever current agents may do, and disregards the interests of possible people and creatures (Attfield, 2003, p.199).

The person-affecting principle was introduced by Jan Narveson to avoid the implication of the total view (on which all the consequences count) that extra people should be brought into existence if the balance of happiness over misery (or good over evil) would be increased thereby. (The name was devised by Derek Parfit, and revised by Peter Singer to bring in non-human beings). The implication of the principle can be summed up in the words of Larry Temkin: 'One situation cannot be worse (or better) than another if there is *no one* for whom it is worse (or better)' (Temkin, 1993, p.209). The idea here is that where no identifiable individual is harmed or benefited, no wrong can be done. The person-affecting principle only takes into account our affecting of identifiable people. It has nothing to say in respect of actions that make the difference between generating one set of people and another set of people, or one individual and another indvidual.

The principle suggests that if we restrict obligations to people already in existence—or identifiable people—we avoid the repugnant conclusion. The person-affecting principle, then, is a more restrictive view of the range of consequences that morally count. It says that only actual people should be taken into account. On this view, consequences for possible people are outside the scope of our moral deliberations:

> This restriction [the restriction to actual people] would deny obligations grounded in (say) the happiness or the well-being of possible people who could be brought into being, and thus any related obligations to generate what might be considered too large a population. It seeks to achieve this by

> confining moral standing to people (and other creatures) who exist already or who are going to exist whatever current agents may do (and is accordingly sometimes called the Prior Existence View). It also implies that people of the twenty-second and subsequent centuries currently lack moral standing, since none of them are yet actual or can even be identified at present (Attfield, 2003, p.51).

So, let us sum up what is being said here about the person-affecting view:

- It denies that we have obligations with respect to the welfare or well-being of future people.
- It denies that we have an obligation to generate future people.
- It confines moral standing to people (and creatures) that exist or who actually will exist.

(Note that the person-affecting view is sometimes called the 'prior existence view'. Peter Singer devised the phrase 'prior existence view' so as to be both neutral between species and to capture the difference between this view and other views such as the total view. The words 'prior existence' are species neutral, as well as capture the fact that the prior existence view or person-affecting principle only takes already existing people or actual people into account. At one stage, Singer used to support the prior existence view. In *Practical Ethics* he wavers between the total view, which he first rejects but later ends up supporting, and the person-affecting principle or prior existence view, which he appears first to adopt and later to discard. For Singer on the total view and prior existence view, see *Practical Ethics*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.103-105, 120-25, 152-56 and 184-91.)

Non-identity cases

We are now in a position to consider the non-identity problem and the person-affecting principle in more detail. Consider that the existence of each and every one us is contingent upon a number of past actions and events: had they not occurred, none of us would have been born. This also applies to future generations. What particular persons will be born depends upon what policies are adopted now. Imagine that we have a choice between a policy which is environmentally responsible and a laissez-faire policy which will destroy large tracts of the natural world. The outcome of our choice of the laissez-faire policy is that the quality of life for future people will not be very good, but their lives are not so bad that they regret being born. It is just that their lives are not very fulfilling. We might now ask whether we have wronged them.

On the person-affecting principle, it makes no sense to say that someone has been wronged unless some particular person is made worse off than she would have been otherwise as a result of what is done to her. But nobody has been made worse off by our choice than they would have been had we chosen differently, for then none of these particular persons in the above scenario would have existed had we acted otherwise. Thomas Schwartz concludes that it does not make sense to say that we have wronged them; to say as such is to commit the 'identifiable fallacy': 'Whatever we may owe

ourselves or our near posterity, we've no obligation extending indefinitely or even terribly far into the future to provide any widespread, continuing benefits to our descendants. This contrary claim rests on the identifiable fallacy' (Schwartz, 1978, p.3?). From his view it follows that we have no moral duty to conserve the environment for the sake of future generations of people. Our only duty in this respect is to present people 'who would like our distant descendants to enjoy a clean, commodious, well-stocked world' (ibid., p.13?).

Note again that the person-affecting principle holds that no action is wrong unless it is somehow harmful for *someone*. Advocates of the principle, such as Schwartz, would reason that since *no identifiable* individuals are harmed by the adoption of the laissez-faire policy, its adoption cannot be wrong, even though it will result in, say, the destruction of the environment, as well as future reductions in human health and happiness.

In his discussion of the non-identity problem, Parfit asks us to imagine that we have a choice of two policies: Depletion and Conservation (1986, pp.362-63):

1. If we adopt Depletion, we will have slightly better lives for the next 300 years, as a result of consuming all the natural resources. After that time, people will have a very low quality of life, due to the depletion of resources.
2. If we adopt Conservation, we will have slightly less benefit now, but future generations (after 300 years from now) will be much better off.

Let us assume that if we choose Depletion then although the people in the future will have a much lower quality of life their lives are still worth living. Now consider that if we had adopted Conservation then these people would not have existed. Further, 'Suppose that we do not assume that causing to exist can benefit. We should ask, 'If particular people live lives that are worth living, is this worse for these people than if they had never existed?' Our answer must be No. Suppose next that we do assume that causing to exist can benefit. Since these future people's lives will be worth living, and they would never have existed if we had chosen Conservation, our choice of Depletion is not only not worse for these people – it *benefits* them.' (Parfit, 1986, p.363).

On the person-affecting view, whether we view causing to exist as a benefit or not, there is no objection to our choice of Depletion. As Parfit says, 'Since it will be bad for no one, our choices cannot have a bad effect. The great lowering of the quality of life provides no moral reason not to choose Depletion'. On this view, 'what is bad must be bad for someone' (ibid., p.363).

Parfit well explains what is wrong with the person-affecting principle (in human contexts). One implication of the view is that it provides no grounds for criticising a policy which, through a drastic reduction of resources or even squandering of resources, allows current people to have a very high quality of life at the expense of the misery of future people. As Attfield argues, since future people do not count at all on this principle, it cannot even provide grounds for adopting a sustainable policy which results in only a

very slight reduction of quality of life for current people but which would go on to result in a good maintainable quality of life for those in the near and far future (Attfield, 2003, p.51). Yet the comparative effects of sustainable policies or policies of consumption on different sets of possible people surely do constitute reasons for or against these policies (Attfield, 2003, p.120; and Parfit, 1986, p.363). As Parfit says, 'The greater lowering of the quality of life must provide us with *some* moral reason not to choose Depletion' (Parfit, 1986, p.363).

Parfit does not endorse the person-affecting principle's implications (implications which centre on the non-identity of future people). Rather he urges us to give up the principle, believing that if in either of two possible outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it would be worse if those who live are worse off than those who would have lived (see Parfit 1986, pp.363-64). Indeed, when confronted by a case in which we have two options or the choice between two policies (say, sustainability and short-term consumption) it would seem that moral criticism is in place for choosing the option that leaves people worse off than those who would have been generated had the other option been chosen.

In addition, most would agree 'that the misery of people whom we could bring about counts as a reason for not generating *them*' (Attfield, 1995, p.150). Indeed, we would consider it wrong—or most people would consider it wrong—if we generated people whom we knew would have a terrible existence when we could have done otherwise or when we could have generated a different group of people that would have had worthwhile lives. But, as Attfield argues, 'If you grant that the misery of possible people would be morally significant, you will find difficulty in maintaining with any consistency that their happiness or their flourishing would be morally insignificant' (ibid., p.151).

Besides all this, the person-affecting principle appears to treat people other than actual and likely ones as second class citizens or worse, of instrumental value only (see Sikora, 1978). But we should surely take into account the good of all who could be brought into existence, both for population issues and in general. If so, then we should reject the principle.

To conclude, it would seem that the person-affecting stance is unsatisfactory with regards to obligations to future people, for current agents can make a difference to the quality of life of people who will exist. When we are able to bring it about that whoever lives has a better quality of life than whoever might have come into being or who might have lived instead then this seems morally significant. Indeed, Attfield states that, 'In addition to having concern for existing people, we can and should be concerned for whoever there will be, within the period that we can affect, even if this concern relates to more than one alternative population, or, as this point could be re-expressed, alternative futures, comprising different sets of possible people' (2007, p.363). To say that our obligations extend beyond existing people to different sets of possible people is, in some sense, to say that morality is not wholly personal and that there can be obligations with regard to whomever there will be in the future; in other words, not all obligations are owed to people already identifiable.

In thinking about the total view and the person-affecting principle, we need to ask, 'Do the interests of people count who are not in existence at the time of current decisions and who only come into being because of them?' The total view says, 'Yes'—the interests of people who are not in existence, but who will exist in the future, do count. The prior existence view says, 'No'—the interests of these people do not count. Most of those likely to be alive in 2080 are among possible people—if their interests count, we should favour the Total View with the proviso that we ensure that we avoid the repugnant conclusion.

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