

Do only existing people deserve moral consideration or do people who will almost certainly come into existence also deserve moral consideration?

It doesn't take much investigation to see that humans have had a somewhat strained relationship with the natural world for many, many years. An often one sided relationship has seen much of the world's natural resources used and the state of the climate worsening. The 1960's and 70's saw a surge in awareness of the climate crisis where more books were being written, examples of these include Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring* published in 1962) and Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*). As time has gone on it has been clear that more needs to be done in the way of sustainability and the use of the natural world. Why we should care for the environment is a debate had by many as is the moral and ethical implications of developing a more environmentally friendly way of life. As part of this, moral consideration is part of the ongoing dilemma in the study of environmental philosophy. This essay will focus on the moral consideration of current and future humans from an environmental ethics perspective. Arguments will debate whether only people who currently exist deserve moral consideration or if people who will almost certainly come into existence also deserve moral consideration.

In order to understand what deserves moral consideration, we must look at what is required to have moral standing. Without moral standing many would argue that there would be no place for moral consideration. The first stance to discuss is anthropocentrism. This is a normative stance which only recognises human beings as beings with moral standing. Secondly there is sentientism, this is another normative stance but it is less restrictive than the previous. Something needs to be 'sentient' to have moral standing, for example if a being is capable of feeling pain it is eligible for moral standing. Thirdly is biocentrism which is far less restrictive than the two already discussed. Biocentrism says that all living things have a good of their own and therefore have moral standing, for example trees deserve moral consideration in their own right as it is a living thing with its own purpose. Following this is ecocentrism, which believes that all systems have moral standing for example ecosystems which work in their own way and therefore deserve moral standing. Through evaluating these different views on moral standing it could be argued that most living things from humans to systems deserve moral consideration as they all have a role to play in the

lives on humans. This anthropocentric view sees the potential in all things as part of human life.

Following the stances mentioned above, the worth of the potential of other things over the lives of humans is worth considering. The Last Man¹ example illustrates an image of the last surviving human. If the aforementioned human destroys the last living things on earth following some kind of apocalypse which killed all animals and humans on earth is he really doing wrong? He is after all the last man left? It could be argued that the last man does nothing wrong as he is the last person alive and therefore he can do as he chooses. However, what if that tree could live on and drop seeds to develop more trees? This would have the potential to lead to a whole new living ecosystem. This example is usually used to argue the role of anthropocentrism but it could also be used for this argument. Say the Last Man destroys everything, he does not offer any moral consideration to those who may come after him. If left alone it as mentioned the natural world could have the potential to go through a process similar to that at the time of the original creation with a new evolutionary system developing. Though maybe weakened due to this not being its intended argument purpose, it could be a good example when considering the potential of living things in the future to develop. As will be examined further on, the needs of the further future generations are not known to us and there is potential for a very different world than what we live in now, which if possible could deserve the same amount of moral consideration as this earth and its inhabitants.

Many philosophers have tried to categorise what exactly deserves moral consideration, for example Kenneth E. Goodpaster "On Being Morally Considerable"² discusses that the main criteria needed for moral consideration is simply being alive. To Goodpaster, only those currently alive deserve moral consideration as it would be impossible to continue linking generation after generation and being after being. The criticism of this view would be that like many other stances it is not very specific in regards as to who deserves moral consideration or otherwise as being alive is a very vague criteria. To support this we see that W. M. Hunt³ writes a response, arguing that Goodpaster has not categorised who or what deserves moral consideration. This is a weaker critique as

¹ Richard and Val Routley, 'Against the Inevitability of Human Chauvinism', in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Elliot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 308-25; W. Murray Hunt, "Are Mere Things Morally Considerable?" *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 59-65.

³ *ibid.*

Goodpaster creates a response to Hunt by explaining his views. He uses a porch as an example and explains that though a porch might need painting, the actual painting is done as per its owners will. It is not the porch itself that decides this as it is an inanimate object. Therefore to Goodpaster only those who are currently existing would deserve moral consideration, not those who have the potential to be alive at some point.

In addition to this, when discussing moral consideration there are many things to consider, not just who deserves moral consideration but how much should they be given. The varying approaches regarding how much moral consideration should be given to future generations will now be discussed beginning with Golding's Narrow Communitarianism⁴. Golding argues that obligations should be confined to those who share (or will share in the future) the same communities as us. This would suggest that some, but not all future people will require moral consideration depending on whether they have the potential to share a community with the current existing people or not. He continues to explain that whilst future generations can benefit from us, we can not benefit from them. This is a weak point in his argument for moral consideration for future people as it should not be focussing on the benefits to the current people as its entire purpose is to ensure that considerations are made. It would be impossible without the use of time travel for current existing people to benefit from the benefits received by the potential future people. Golding also discusses the sense of a 'shared life' between current and future communities. Through creating links between current existing people and the potential people who could come in to existence it creates a caring duty between the two. This would suggest that Golding is for moral consideration for all future people who can share a community, however he does recognise that that link would weaken over time as the differences would become much greater between the two. Despite this, though the link would weaken from our generation for example, it would still be stronger for future generations after this generation and then further generations etc. Therefore it could be argued that each generation would have a responsibility to morally consider future generations to a point, but not to the point of no end where all possible future people would come in to it. Only immediate future people to this current generation would be considered for now, and the next generation would consider the following generation and so on and so forth. Though Golding makes some interesting points, he does not mention the

⁴Martin Golding, '*Obligations to Future Generation*', in *Responsibilities to Future Generations: Environmental Ethics*, edited by Ernest Partridge (New York: Prometheus Books, 1981).

requirements of different communities. This weakens his argument substantially as what might be required by communities now could well be obsolete by the time the future comes.

The next approach to discuss is that of John Passmore, and his stance called The Consecutive Chain⁵. Passmore argues that there is a consecutive chain of obligations spanning across current existing people and those who have not yet come in to existence. What Passmore means by this is that our obligations are to our immediate successors and we should include what we love and what we would like to see continued. Similar to the previous, this stance is also combination and some similarities can be seen between this stance and Golding's as they are both recognise that links will weaken over time. The main weakness in Passmore's stance is that it, similarly to Golding's stance, fails to acknowledge the needs of future people. Though he believes that future people deserve moral consideration, it is impossible to know what their needs would be therefor it would be incredibly difficult to form a chain of command if you will in order to provide that consideration as he discusses. In addition to this though Passmore recognises that some moral consideration should be given to future people, he does not recognise that partial recognition could result in harm for further generations after our successors which weakens his stance for moral consideration for all future people who may or may not come in to existence. Evidence to support this argument can be found in works by Routley who discusses the potential risks of moral consideration on a generation to generation basis as it could result in a weak link somewhere which could have negative effects on future generations.

Next, O'Neil offers an even broader approach with regards to who is eligible for moral consideration. The main critique is that his stance is not very specific which could be argued as being a good or a bad thing when it comes to moral consideration for current people or just current people who exist now depending on which view you personally hold. O'Neil explains that there should be a passing of values to ensure there is a community between us and future generations. Again, we can see how this stance is encouraging the forming of an emotional or a caring link between the current people in existence and the future people who will come in to existence. Whilst ensuring a link and an ongoing community which shares

⁵John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, second edn. (London: Duckworth, 1980).

the values of its ancestors sounds lovely, it does not specifically state how far in to the future people who could come in to existence should have moral consideration.

Another interesting stance on our duty to provide consideration to future generations is given by Rawls⁶. He explains that we should ensure that future generations should have the same amount of resources as those who currently exist. This is a sensible for moral consideration of future people and not just those who currently exist, however as argued by Attfeild⁷ it would be hard to control the amount of resources needed. In order to ensure this is done correctly we would need to work out the amount of next generations there would be and their population size. Therefor though this argument suggests current and potential human beings should receive moral consideration, it has other challenges which would make it difficult to implement. In addition to this, it is important to note here that Rawls' stance includes the future people but not animals. It could be worth considering the implications on the future people if there were an extinction of certain animals due to a lack of moral consideration given to them by the current existing generation of humans.

Following this, Barry argues for a moral consideration for all future people of the next generation and this should involve fairness. Similar to Rowles, Barry believes that there should be some kind of equality when it comes to resources passed on. Barry recognises the challenge and in a contrast to other stances he suggests that technological advances should be offered in the way of compensation for resources that have been exploited by this generation. Similarly to the previous discussed stance, whilst it is a good argument for ensuring some kind of moral consideration for the future people, it would require a lot of prior knowledge about the future generations in order to implement. Attfeild recognises that while it is important to plan for the future when it comes to resources such as food and water, it is impossible to know if our planning would ever be successful. This would make it near impossible to implement any policies or laws to ensure that moral consideration is given to the next generation. In a series of essays, R. M. Hare⁸ discusses that it is possible to consider future generations through changing the amount of resources used over time. He

⁶ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1971]).

⁷ Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, second edn., 2014, pp. 89-97

⁸ Hare, R.M., 'Possible People', in Hare, *Essays in Bioethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.67-83. Reprinted in *Bioethics*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, 1988, pp.279-93

believes that if the use of resources was optimised before the addition to the population it could all be done in a way which offers moral consideration to those already existing and those who have the potential to exist. Perhaps this could be something to consider in order to strengthen Barry's stance and make more possible to implement, however this would still be challenging.

All stances mentioned above discuss links between generations and appeal to a more caring nature. If someone cares for something they are simply more likely to look after it than if they do not care at all. Through appealing to the more caring nature the above stances provide arguments which do agree that some extent of moral consideration is needed for those potential future people the current existing people may be linked to. However, what happens when the link grows weaker and more distant? Should all people who have the potential to come in to existence be given moral consideration?. One way to look at this is to argue that only the generations that would be impacted by the actions of those who currently exist should deserve moral consideration. This however is a weak argument as the actions we take now would have an impact on the actions the future existing people would take and so on and so forth. This would result in a huge chain of cause and effect that would be incredibly hard to keep track of when trying to be morally considerate as the actions taken now will change the actions of the future whether that be positively or negatively.

Another viewpoint to consider in this debate is that of the Total View and The Repugnant Conclusion. The Total View takes in to account the total amount of happiness by volume. Therefore, by adding more people you are automatically adding more happiness in to the volume of happiness. This view agrees that current humans have to allow moral consideration to those who may come in to existence in the future as each potential new life as the potential to add even more volumes of happiness. A key issue with this argument is that by adding more and more people to the earth it is putting more strain on an already volatile situation. The Repugnant Conclusion is seen as some form of a result of the Total View. This conclusion highlights an ethical issue relating to the amount of humans that are on the planet at one time, this is known as *population ethics*. This conclusion accepts that there is a risk of a long term lower quality of happiness for some as a result of the overall addition of people. It could be possible that a less populated world would have individuals that were happier on the whole. However a more populated world might have individuals

who are less happy on the whole, but the overpopulated world would still be 'better' as the overall volume would be more, even if the individual were less. By adding more and more people to increase the happiness on earth there is also a risk of overpopulation. This would have an impact on resources and the potential for human life to go extinct, though many supporters of the total view would deny that this is a possibility.

Following The Repugnant Conclusion Jan Narveson⁹ offers another stance which sets to avoid the implications of the Total View. Unlike other stances discussed thus far, this stance is much more restrictive and specific. This is a strength as it offers a clearly cut view of who should be included when it comes to moral consideration, or not as the case may be. This stance is called the Person Affecting Principle. According to this stance there is a moral obligation for future existing people, but only those who could definitely come in to existence. By being more specific, this leads to less obligation on the currents existing humans part and also be possible in order to improve their quality of life.

Many texts in the field of environmental philosophy discuss the anthropocentric view or even the human chauvinism that is shown whilst discussing the relationship of humans and other creatures on the planet and its land. From a religious aspect within Christianity for example argue whether humans are stewards to look after God's creation, or dominions who can use the earth and its resources as they see fit. An argument stemmed from this debate is where humans should use the world as it is only a temporary state before the union with God at the end of life. Or, should they be protecting the earth in order to please God in order to reach that union. The Genesis legacy is discussed at length by many as it can be seen as the root of anthropocentrism. Therefore considering this, the relationship between human beings, creatures of the earth and the land would need to be able to be established in order to provide a response on moral consideration for current inhabitants or future generations alike.

Humans often complex relationship with the land has been discussed by many. It could be argued that not even all currently existing people are being morally considered, yet alone those who will almost certainly come in to existence. For example, deforestation is often a result of exports to other countries. There are countries like the UK with a huge amount of

⁹Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Part 4.

food waste whilst there are others full of famine. Some would argue that a strong environmental ethic is needed to ensure a fairer distribution of resources. In addition to this, it could be argued that the land itself deserves moral consideration, not just current existing people and those who may come in to existence. Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic¹⁰ was seen as a revolutionary piece in environmental philosophy. It explains that there should be some form of moral code of conduct between humans and the land, more so than there was at the time of writing. He calls for moral consideration for the land in order to ensure its existence and continued existence. The land and humans should be involved in interconnected caring relationships. By showing more consideration for the land it would preserve it meaning that not only people who currently exist have moral consideration, but also those who will almost certainly come into existence. Though it could be said that this is a weaker argument as Leopold isn't discussing moral consideration for humans specifically, the basics of using the land in a caring and interconnecting way would create a good practice to pass on to further generations. As previously discussed in this paper, Brian Barry argues that some kind of compensation should be given to future generations to 'pay back' for exploitation from previous generations. By creating a better relationship we could create a more sustainable way of living, this would be of benefit to future generations.

Therefore to conclude, this essay has discussed arguments supported by the work of key philosophers. It is clear to see that there is a wide range of arguments for and against each side from both philosophical and religious points of view. However the main evidence discussed in this essay shows ultimately it is the responsibility of the people now to ensure that the earth and its resources are protected. There are many who agree with this and seek to live a sustainable lifestyle. Whilst others would argue that the here and now is important, and that the future is going to happen regardless of how we act now. At some stage the earth will run out of resources, or the climate crisis will reach an unsurvivable peak. There will always be a link between generations, even as our link to the future weakens it will never be able to be completely undone. Therefore though as arguments in this essay have shown it may be difficult to control the implications that future generations see, it is only us who can ensure preservation. Furthermore it is our duty to ensure that some form of moral consideration is given to all potential existing future people in order to maintain the human race.

¹⁰ Leopold, Aldo, 'The Land Ethic' [originally appeared in Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949], in *Environmental Philosophy: from animal rights to radical ecology*, eds. Zimmerman et al (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998).

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