

What it Means to be Responsible

Reflections on Our Responsibility for the Future

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Introduction

The concept of responsibility is a central one in ethics but it seems to require rethinking when we consider the fact that oftentimes the consequences of actions in contemporary, technological society extend far into the future. To whom or what are we responsible, and how far into the future do our obligations extend? In this essay, I consider the question of our possible responsibility for the future, specifically the future state of our planet, and the well-being of future people and other beings. I argue that we do have responsibilities to future people and an obligation to try to preserve and protect the planet and its living beings for the future, and I present a new concept of responsibility, one that provides a way of understanding our actions in light of concern for the future.

The central problem with an argument that considers the effects of present actions on the future world lies in the fact that those acting today will not exist in the world they are affecting with their actions. Why should people, now living, care about the consequences of their actions on a future world whose inhabitants are currently non-existent? Even if held accountable by those future generations, no price for wrongful actions can be extracted from the dead. We lack the usual motivations for acting ethically in situations that might impact future generations, and though we may imagine angry voices condemning us for our lack of forethought and care some several generations into the future, we will never hear those words of contempt. Despite this, Attfield (1998) argues that "intergenerational justice remains a serious possibility, as actual future generations which come into being, and find that they have been deprived by earlier generations of opportunities for satisfying some of their most basic needs, could reasonably criticize their ancestors for failing to facilitate the satisfaction of foreseeable vital interests" (p. 211).

The problem of responsibility for the future is a very difficult one. It is one thing to be ethical towards those who live near, those with whom we share space and time, those with whom we have relations and common dealings. Here the motivation is strong because the impact of our actions affect our immediate community. Ethical arguments struggle, however, when lack of proximity is a factor, for it is difficult to take into consideration the impact of our actions on those spatially distant from us. This problem arises whenever we are asked to take into

consideration or contribute to the welfare of those who live in distant places, those who do not share our community, and those whose suffering we do not directly experience. Without the presence of the other face-to-face, without a real relation to the other person, it is difficult to remain aware of and concerned about his or her need. How much more difficult then, to take into consideration those who do not yet exist, those others we will never know and can only imagine. The difficulty is further complicated by the fact that often the choices we make today, choices that involve use of finite resources, for instance, or the use of technology that may have deleterious aftereffects, may seem at the time to be valuable for the comfort, health or well-being of the contemporaneous human population. Indeed, most of our ethical deliberation is concerned with present actions. In what way and how can it be argued that sacrifices or restrictions on some very useful and beneficial activities and technologies must be made in order to benefit future peoples who do not yet exist?



To address these questions, I begin by looking at the genesis of the concept of responsibility in Aristotle. I then consider the changed nature of our actions today, a situation calling for a new concept of responsibility, before turning to Hans Jonas and others who attempt to articulate such a concept. In the final section, I discuss the problem of motivation in relation to the demands that responsibility for the future places on us and consider some responses to that problem.

Responsibility in Aristotle

Thinking of responsibility for the future, it makes sense to consider extending traditional theories of ethics to see if they might coherently take into account the nature of such responsibilities. To this end, I begin with Aristotle's discussion of responsibility in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to see how it might support or fail to support an extension of the concept of responsibility to encompass the future.

For Aristotle, the capacity human beings have to think about what they will do is what lies at the root of our responsibility for our actions. We are free to act, within certain necessary limits, and we have the capacity to think about our choices, therefore responsibility accompanies

actions when, as Aristotle says, the "source is in oneself." Rational beings with the capacity to choose among actions and bring about ends cannot escape from the notion of responsibility. It is a given, provided one is free from coercion in one's actions. Here responsibility is not responsiveness to the Other, not responding to another's need or want, as in Levinas. Rather, it is that since we are free to make choices and commit acts, we must accept responsibility for the consequences of those choices.

For Aristotle, to act responsibly is to act beautifully, because when a person does so he or she engages the greatest capacity available to human beings; that is "thinking things through," *dianoia*. What differentiates ethical choice from willing, desiring, and wishing, for Aristotle, is that it involves deliberation (NE 1112a 15). To think things through is to look ahead and estimate consequences using imagination and forethought and to make judgments about possible actions based on experience and memory; this is the kind of reasoning that responsibility requires. Aristotle says, "We deliberate about things that are up to us and are matters of action" (NE 1112a32). Choice is not something that is shared by irrational beings, it is the mark of a being with self-control (NE 1111b15). Choice is a rational response to desire, the situation, and the options for action. Choice is "concerned with things that are up to us" and it is also distinguished by its involvement with what is good and what is bad. Thus choice is firmly in the realm of practical, ethical action.

With his emphasis on *dianoia*, Aristotle offers one way to think about responsibility to the future; it is the lack of "thinking things through," in preference for shortsightedness regarding means and ends, that results in acts of harm, both to the environment and to future people. If we fail to think things through to the consequences of our actions we are not acting responsibly. And ignorance is no justification for poor choices, for Aristotle points out that we can be ignorant and still responsible. If we deliberately become irrational, as when we become drunk, or when we ought to know something and yet fail to, we are still held responsible, "on the grounds that it is up to people themselves not to be ignorant, since they are in control of how much care they take" (NE 1114a). Aristotle is rigorous in his insistence that human beings, because they are rational and have the capacity to "think things through," are responsible for their actions. For Aristotle, to be a good human being is to accept responsibility for one's choices and actions, and that entails taking into consideration the possible negative repercussions of one's actions.

But perhaps, Aristotle says, "one is not the sort of person who takes any care" (NE 1114a5). Perhaps here we have the crux of it; that there are people who don't care, who are careless. Aristotle says such people, despite their lack of care, are still responsible because it was always in

the beginning up to them to use their intelligence to make good choices and the fact that they don't care is the result of a long line of deliberations that denigrated the value of their own beautiful actions, the concerns of others, and the consequences of their actions on themselves and others. Not caring about the effects of one's actions on others is an indication of a certain lack of moral character. If one is the kind of person who doesn't care, it is because all along the way one has chosen actions that reinforce the lack of care. On Aristotle's view, we always become who we are through a series of choices over time, and those choices form our moral character.

Aristotle's position is quite clear: human beings are essentially free beings who have the capacity to think about their actions and are therefore responsible for those actions. Ignorance is not a justifiable reason for refusing responsibility, because ignorance is something that is also up to us. As thinking beings we cannot simply claim to be ignorant because our capacity to think implicates us in responsibility even for our ignorance. And a lack of concern about our choices and their repercussions indicts us as well, for it indicates the kind of moral character that we have developed over time, through all the choices we have made in the past.

The Problem of Responsibility Today

That ignorance is no excuse for Aristotle seems to indicate that those of us who fail to acknowledge scientifically based warnings about climate change, or who acknowledge the warnings and refuse to heed them, are responsible for our failure. To think things through would be to take into account in deliberating about our choices the realities that face us, the sure consequences of some of our actions, those that we have experience and knowledge enough to foresee. If the consequences of our actions today extend far into the future, this would require that we take that far future into consideration in our actions.

It is just because of this farther extension of consequences into the future that Jonas argues that human action today differs radically from human action in Aristotle's time. As he says, "modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects, and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them" (Jonas, 1984, p. 6). Powerful technologies in use today have effects that extend far into the future, and this includes harms that arise directly from their manufacture and use, such as resource depletion and pollution from hazardous waste, as well as harms that occur because of the scope their reach, as in climate change. The negative effects are not limited to the earth and its ecosystems but include effects on communities of people whose livelihoods are harmed and whose basic goods, such as water and air, are polluted and rendered unusable. These consequences affect living beings over

their lifetimes, threaten the health of the planet, and are passed down to future generations as the integrity of the global ecosystem is damaged over time.

For Jonas, technology has enabled us to greatly extend the scope of our actions and magnified their repercussions, and yet our concept of responsibility has not grown to encompass the new range of action. Particularly, Jonas has in mind the repercussions of genetic engineering, nuclear technologies, and other technologies that have the capacity to impact the future in highly significant ways: "more specifically, it will be my contention that with certain developments of our powers the *nature of human action* has changed, and since ethics is concerned with action, it should follow that the changed nature of human action calls for a change in ethics as well, in the more radical sense that the qualitatively novel nature of certain of our actions has opened up a whole new dimension of ethical relevance for which there is no precedent in the standards and canons of traditional ethics" (1984, p. 1).

For example, the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf had consequences that extend far into the future, affecting marine and coastal ecosystems, the livelihood of human beings dependent on a healthy environment for sustenance, and marine life far from the origin of the spill. Ecosystems are by nature interconnected and interdependent, and the reach of the spill was extensive. Its impact is not limited in space or time. As well, we might ask who exactly is responsible for the oil spill in the Gulf? Is it the technicians and engineers, the government regulations that allow drilling to be done in extreme conditions, the companies making a profit, or the consumers whose desire for cheap fossil fuel drives the market? This kind of diffusion of responsibility, a diffuse collective responsibility that Stephen Gardiner refers to as a "fragmentation of agency," means that it is difficult to assign responsibility. As Gardiner points out, "climate change is caused not by a single agent but by a vast number of individuals and institutions not unified by a comprehensive structure of agency. This is important because it poses a challenge to humanity's ability to respond" (2010, p. 88).

How much is up to us then, to use Aristotle's term, in today's technological, global world? The notion of collective responsibility is pertinent because in a democratic society responsibility for collective actions like oil drilling would seem to rest with all citizens. How we are to understand democratic responsibility, diffused among many, is a significant problem given the altered nature of human action and the extended reach of the consequences of our actions. And because the consequences will fall primarily on future generations, there is a disincentive to alter our behavior, particularly if that might make current lives more difficult. I think it is self-evident that we need a new ethical understanding to frame our choices and provide us with guidance in order to

take into account the magnified effects of action in a technological world.

While a new ethical understanding that takes into consideration the extended consequences of our actions in a technological society seems necessary, another question arises: where do our obligations end if we begin to think of extending them to future beings and the future existence of a livable planet? How might such seemingly open-ended obligations be argued for? And if, to be responsible, as Aristotle claims, is to "think things through," are there limits to our capacity to be responsible?

Rethinking Responsibility

Here I think it is a good moment to turn to Jonas, who argues in *The Imperative of Responsibility* that, difficult as it may seem, we do have a responsibility for the future. He presents an argument for responsibility based on the presence of an objectively existing good, and he claims that fulfillment of the human good results from taking the effects of our actions on the future into account (Jonas, 1984, pp. 80-82). When we are not able to predict the long-term consequences of our actions he argues that we should proceed with prudence, even to the extent of being guided by fear, in order to ensure that we do not create extensive future harms.

For Jonas, the human being occupies a special place in the lifeworld. Jonas sees the human being as that being which is uniquely capable of responsibility, and the presence of this capacity entails that it must be acted on if a one is to fully become the being one is capable of becoming. The capacity for responsibility contributes to the "what it is to be" a human being and as such, informs the *telos* of human being. Jonas says that "every living thing has its own end which needs no further justification. In this, man has nothing over other living beings, except that he alone can have responsibility also for them, that is, for guarding their self-purpose" (Jonas, 1984, p. 98).

For Jonas, the fact that each organism desires and pursues the continuance of its own life points to the fact that life is a value for each being. Life is a good and as such it presents the being with the capacity to take responsibility with an imperative to protect and preserve it, to recognize the value it is for all living beings. The particular human good lies in the capacity of the human being to recognize and respond to the imperative of responsibility. The practice of taking responsibility for our choices, of taking the well-being and future of the planet and its beings into consideration, draws out the higher capabilities of the rational animal. With human recognition of the independent good that is founded in being comes the possibility for fulfillment of the human capability to respond ethically, that is, to accept the duty that arises from the demand implicit in the existence of an objective, transcendent good. The human good, the fulfillment of the

human capacity to respond to the value found in existence with concern and care, finds its expression in relation to the universal good.

For Jonas, the imperative of responsibility commands us to respond ethically for the sake of the good that is evidenced in Being, a good that reveals itself in each living beings' pursuit of its own continuance, its desire for life. As well, responsibility includes protecting the possibility for the continued existence of human freedom and ethical responsiveness. Obeying the moral imperative we have the opportunity to fulfill our *telos*, while at the same time we find a place for ourselves in the natural world, recognizing and responding to the good that is in Being. As Jonas says, "the secret or paradox of morality is that the self forgets itself over the pursuit of the object, so that a higher self (which indeed is also a good in itself) might come into being. The good man is not he who made himself good but rather he who did the good for its own sake. But the good is the 'cause' at issue out there in the world, indeed the cause of the world" (1984, p. 85). As Jonas tries to show, the good of the human and the good in the world are not separate but the same. Taking responsibility for the future becomes necessary as soon as we recognize our potential to harmfully impact the future and, as Aristotle argues, once this recognition registers, ignorance is no longer an acceptable plea.

Rights and Responsibility

Another means of arguing for responsibilities to future generations, one that is less metaphysical and more supportive of political action, is to consider the question of the rights of future people. A proponent of this view is Hiskes (2009), who argues that "global warming and climate change have made it abundantly clear that the human impact on the environment is an emergent one, the product of uncounted individual decisions and choices on one hand, and public policies and political omissions on the other, which make every one of us responsible for putting all the rest of us in a new situation of risk, and not only "all of us" but those who come after us as well" (p. 146). Hiskes goes on to explain that "rights are necessarily the legal response to harms, real or potential. The fact that they are new and collective harms that do not fit within the traditional individualist language of either rights or responsibility do not alter the equation of rights as a response to harm. New harms demand new rights. Because they are emergent harms, the rights that they begat will share their emergent ontological nature" (p. 146).

This argument supports the contention that we cannot disregard responsibilities to the future simply because future people do not now exist. Future people are continually coming into existence, even as the effects of our actions emerge over long periods of time. There is a synchrony in terms of the emergence of future beings and

the emergence of harms. Both are initiated in the present, in the actions of present day beings, and both concern a time after present day actors are gone. Future needs are predictable and future beings are coming into being all the time. It is not as if the future exists at some point far into the distance, with no connection to the present. The future is always coming into being, it follows closely on the heels of the present, and while we see changes in each generation, physical human beings will always need clean air to breathe and water to drink, as well as fire to stay warm. The realities of life for future beings are being established now through our contemporary actions and this is a fact we cannot deny. If we refuse to take responsibility for the impact of our actions on future generations, we must admit that we are willfully disregarding this fundamental reality and its ethical implications.

In a similar vein, Fitzpatrick (2007) argues that a conception of justice based upon a notion of "mutual advantage among cooperating parties of roughly equal power and vulnerability" is too restrictive (p. 377). Justice, insofar as it relates to rights and obligations, is a concept not limited to those sharing space and time. He says that, "attribution of rights to future generations will therefore be legitimate if we can speak of an earlier generation's wronging future generations by spoiling the environment the former was given and has relied upon for its flourishing in the same way that future generations depend upon it for theirs" (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 377).

Fitzpatrick turns to a notion of stewardship to frame the question of responsibilities to future generations; contemporary inhabitants of the Earth do not own it, they have merely inherited it and should care for it sustainably in order to pass a flourishing environment down to future generations. Future generations have a right to inherit a healthy ecosystem, just as we did, and this right entails an obligation on the part of the living to pass down a viable planet. The responsibility to do so is centered in the right future generations have to be protected from harms caused by others, as well as the right to inherit and enjoy what previous generations have inherited and enjoyed. That people depend upon a healthy environment to flourish, and that a diminished environment is harmful to people is at the basis of Fitzpatrick's argument. He considers future people to be the moral equals of presently living people, and therefore claims we cannot disregard their rights or turn aside from our responsibility not to cause them harm. He argues that "if we fail to conserve limited natural resources, or to control dangerous waste, or to curb greenhouse gas emissions, then we will be causing people harm, not merely failing to benefit them" (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 377). The fact that these people do not exist simultaneously with us is not a reason to fail to take them into ethical consideration. Fitzpatrick concludes by arguing that we need to reconsider the meaning of justice and

rights in order to include responsibilities to future generations in our consideration because there is simply no justification possible for disregarding the effects of our actions on the future.

There is no doubt that accepting responsibility for the future will require a great deal of effort and even sacrifice on the part of those of us living today. In the next and final section, I take a brief look at the way in which an ethic of care might provide the needed motivation for the difficult changes that taking future generations into ethical consideration might require.

Motivation and Care

To accept the burden of responsibility for what is up to us, difficult as it is where our technological reach is so extended and agency is so fragmented, is to strive to fulfill the capacity we have to respond to the good and protect and preserve it. This task, however, is difficult, not only because of the extent of effects in time and space, fragmentation of agency, and the difficulty of predicting harms, but also because in many cases we may benefit now from actions that result in harms to future generations. What could motivate us to make the necessary sacrifices required by responsibility of this scope and nature?

Jonas turns to the human capacity for care for an answer to this question. He uses the analogy of the parent and child to demonstrate that we are attuned to caring in a fundamental way (Jonas, 1984, pp. 98-108). Jonas sees that caring is a mode of being for the human being, one that is demonstrated naturally in the attention and love parents give to their children as they nourish these beings who will exist in the future. It can be argued that the care of children is ultimately selfish, a way to project particular and individual genetic material forward. Yet, at the same time, most stable societies demonstrate their concern and care about the future through the fostering of all children in the society and through their concern with passing down cultural and physical artifacts to posterity. If selfish instincts were at issue here, individuals would not bequeath to unknown future others the endowments and monuments and institutions they have.

Jonas' example of the statesman as a paradigm of responsibility toward the future reflects the important role of democratic social institutions and governments in responsibility. Established to foster and preserve culture and enable the orderly transfer of power from generation to generation, governments, at their best, are concerned with bettering the conditions of the people and ensuring that opportunities, values, artifacts, inventions, techniques, and other "objects" cultivated and produced by society are preserved and passed down. This example illustrates the presence, in social institutions, of a fundamental care and concern with the future and future peoples that can serve as an example and guide for a practical ethic of

responsibility for the future.

There is another way to think about care in relation to future generations. We care about the future because we know we are finite. It is only through care of the future that we can extend the reach of our grasp on life through bequeathing a planet that is livable and viable, one that preserves and protects the cycle of life for the beings who will inhabit it. Knowing my own finitude, I can feel reassured knowing that I leave behind me a flourishing world, one that can sustain future generations. The natural drive toward transcendence of finitude through leaving behind works, objects or beings of lasting value can be engaged as a motivating force in an ethics that is concerned with extending its reach to future generations.

There is, finally, another way to think of the role of care as a motivating force for assuming responsibility; not necessarily care or love for future persons unknown to us, but love for the Earth and for life itself. Perhaps we should reframe the question of an ethics of responsibility for the future, because it can be argued that we are motivated to moderate and measure our actions toward nature and to care about the health and continued viability of the Earth because of our love for it, and for the life it offers. We are capable of caring not only about those potential beings of the future who will inherit this planet but also about the planet itself as a living being we will pass down.[1] Inspired by the beauty of existence, fleeting though it is, we desire its continuance even though we will not be here to enjoy its pleasures forever, and this too is reflective of our ethical capacity.

Conclusion

In the preceding I've shown what I see is a need for a reconsidered understanding of the meaning and extent of responsibility today, and I've talked about some of the difficulties facing us in attempting to accept responsibility for the future, as well as some of the motivational forces that might help us overcome those difficulties. To begin to take responsibility for the Earth and future generations we can consider ourselves as caretakers, trustees or stewards. We can pursue sustainable practices that conserve resources and other basic goods for future generations to benefit from and enjoy. Recognizing the presence of the good in existence, we can protect it by considering the long-term effects of our choices and actions on the future. The damage we've done has been done collectively, as Fitzpatrick points out, and the only way to prevent further damage and protect the future is through collective action. This will require intensive dialogue as we think through the farther consequences in order to modify our behavior accordingly while proceeding cautiously, and it will certainly entail political will and political action.

Taking responsibility will require thinking about

ourselves differently, as well. We must develop a new self-understanding, one that reflects our increasing knowledge concerning the extent of the effects of our actions on the Earth and the future. The human capacity for responsibility is a reflection of what Jonas calls "the higher self," a good-in-itself that comes into being when we recognize the value of life, reflect on the consequences of our choices, and take responsibility for the harms we cause. Thus, a

significant aspect of the good of the human being is the human capacity to bear responsibility. The continued existence of the good for all beings rests on humans assuming that responsibility, and the time for us to recognize that is now. If we fail to take responsibility it will be a failure of justice and of love, towards both future beings and the planet.

Notes

1. "When men act for the sake of a future they will not live to see, it is for the most part out of love for persons, places and forms of activity, a cherishing of them, nothing more grandiose. It is indeed self-contradictory to say: 'I love him or her or that place or that institution or that activity, but I don't care what happens to it after my death.' To love is, amongst other things, to care about the future of what we love" (Passmore, 1980, p. 53).

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