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THE PROBLEM OF FUTURE GENERATIONS AS IT RELATES TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Stephen M. Clinton

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In the opening chapter of *Obligations to Future Generations* (1978), Thomas Schwartz takes the position that we have "no obligation to provide widespread, continuing benefits to our descendants." (p.3). While this represents a negative approach, it sets forth the nature of the overall problem--what, if anything, do we owe as a moral obligation to future generations?

The Bible takes the opposite approach. It endorses both the opportunity to preserve and enhance the future lives of our descendants and the obligation to equip them so that they may live successfully before God. Examples abound, from Cain, Able and Seth who were taught to worship and obey God by their parents, on through the scripture. Specific commands regarding obligations to future generations were given to Israel in seven passages in Deuteronomy 6-12 alone (6:2,3,7,20-25; 7:4; 10:15; 11:19,21; 12:12,18,28). Deuteronomy 6 and 11 contain the specific injunction for fathers to teach their sons. The other passages include daughters and servants as participants in the blessings as they also are obedient.

The issue of obligation to future generations raises interesting questions. One question which has not been given thorough treatment concerns the identity of those future generations. The discussion usually centers on the identity of future persons based on specific genetic criteria, ie. they are persons linked to us genetically and so form specific links between us and future people. However, in reading the literature I did not find one proposed definition of identity dealing with the problem in light of the problem of identity over time. The ship of Theseus example, for instance, would remove the concept of specific genetic material from the position of contention as the best definition of identity. What then would constitute a link between ourselves and those to whom we supposedly have an obligation?

Another question concerns the possibility of seeing future obligations as obligations to all future generations taken as a group, without regard to the specific identity of the individuals in that group. After all, even if we do not know precisely who it will be, someone will live in generations after us (assuming we do not destroy the planet). But moral obligations are usually undertaken in reference to one's own promises or commitments to specific individuals. It is unclear what type of obligation exists with reference to a *group* of people to whom no *promises* have been made. This relates to the question of the biblical understanding that each generation has a God-given responsibility to each succeeding generation, at least (both spiritual teaching and father-son relationship).

We will investigate some proposed solutions given to some of these problems by secular authors (I could find no specifically Christian articles or books on these issues). The procedure will be to use test cases to examine the proposals. At the end I will propose a way to bring a few strands together toward a solution.

Part One: Population Control and Future Generations

A. One of the normative problems within this general issue concerns setting policies for population control. This question has been

addressed by Greg Kavka (1981) and in a counter-response by Derek Parfit (1981) (all quotes will be followed by page numbers indicating the source in these two articles).

Kavka begins by assuming the relativity of time and place of procreation and that the identity of the offspring is based on specific genetic material, i.e. if the time or environmental conditions of any act of procreation were changed in any way, it is assumed that the resulting offspring will be so different as to constitute new individuals. He also assumes that it is better for someone to live than never to have existed at all.

Given these three starting points, he introduces two possible policies: laissez faire and controlled growth. If we follow laissez faire population policies we will have a different set of persons in the future than if we follow any other set of policies. Since we have assumed that it is better to live than not to live, it is clear we will not with intent essentially harm anyone if we follow laissez faire.

On the grounds of the assumptions and argument above, we do not have an obligation to do anything by way of population policies in behalf of future generations, for if we do anything which would affect future generations we would be changing the conditions of procreation and this would give rise to another set of persons. Since the first set would not exist in fact, we have no obligations to them. Kavka dubs this the Paradox of Future Generations.

The key premise in the Paradox is the Obligation Principle: One can have an obligation to choose act or policy A rather than alternative B only if it is the case that if one chose B, some particular person would exist and be worse off than if one had chosen A. (p. 95) Kavka points out that this premise ignores the good benefits of some actions, which invalidates its application in some cases, so he presents a wider formulation of the principle: One can have an obligation to choose act or policy A rather than alternative B only if it is the case that either (1) if one chose B, some particular person would exist and be worse off than if one had chosen A, or (2) if one chose A, some particular person would exist and be better off than if one had chosen B. (p. 99)

But even this formulation seems to have some problems. Someone could be taken to be obligated to have a handicapped child because the "gift of life" to the child would outweigh the measurable harm. Thus even the reformulation is weak in virtue of its failure to suggest an ethical definition of "good" and a way to apply that definition which seems right to us.

Kavka then suggests a maximizing principle that requires weighting the potential benefits to different actual and possible people and choosing the act that produces the greater net benefit. But this also has problems. Consider a society where slavery is legal. A couple has a child with the plan to sell him/her into slavery into an upper class home for the money they will get. Later in life the child returns to the couple and complains that they acted wrongly. They could correctly, on the obligation and maximization grounds, argue that they bestowed life on the child and welfare on themselves, thus outweighing any negatives. On the basis of the plausible assumptions and principles presented by Kavka thus far, we arrive at this counter-intuitive conclusion. A principle needs to be added which will value life in more wholistic way.

The final principle Kavka adds develops from the notion of restricted lives: life for an individual that is significantly deficient in one or more of the major respects that generally make human lives valuable and worth living. The principle is that, other things being equal, conditions of society or the world are intrinsically undesirable from a moral point of view to the extent that they involve people living restricted lives.

This bears directly on the case of the slave child. The life of the child cannot be valued nearly so much because, as a slave. it will be a highly restricted life. Thus, with this last modification it seems Kavka has a comprehensive principle regarding obligations to future generations in the area of procreation.

Kavka then applies this principle to the Paradox of Future Individuals:

For our generation to procreate, consume, and pollute to our heart's content, and to justify doing so on the grounds that future individuals are benefited (or not harmed), would be analogous to what the slave child's parents do. (p. 108)

The counter-intuitive conclusion to which these principles lead provides grounds for rejecting the paradox. Therefore, we do not have

the freedom to follow laissez faire population policies since such policies would lead to restricted lives.

B. Parfit begins his response to Kavka by describing three kinds of choices regarding the makeup of future generations. Different Number choices effect the number and identities of future people. Same Number choices effect the identities of future people, but do not effect their number. Same People choices effect neither (p. 113). Parfit uses these distinctions to create examples which will give a finer discrimination than the one major case Kavka uses (the slave child). Both Kavka and Parfit think the Paradox applies to Same Number and Same people choices.

Parfit gives two cases which he follows throughout the article. For discussion purposes it will be useful to have these:

The Nuclear Technician. Some technician lazily chooses not to check some tank in which nuclear wastes are buried. As a result there is a catastrophe two centuries later. Leaked radiation kills and injures thousands of people.

The Risky Policy. Suppose that, as a community, we have a choice between two energy policies. Both would be completely safe for at least two centuries, but one would have, for the further future, certain risks. If we choose the Risky policy, the standard of living would be slightly higher over the next century. We do choose this policy. As a result there is a similar catastrophe two centuries later, which kills and injures thousands of people. (pp. 113-114)

The first example is a Same People choice. The second example is a Same Number choice.

Parfit also uses the restricted life principle but shows the inadequacy of Kavka's principle by drawing out two possible meanings of the terms involved.

(1) If someone lives a restricted life, this is intrinsically worse than if this person had never existed, and someone else had existed in his place and lived an unrestricted life. (a life not worth living)

(2) If someone lives a restricted life, this is intrinsically had, worse than if this person had never existed, and no one had existed in his place. (a life worth not living) p. 120

Parfit thinks, and I agree, that (2) is most in keeping with the description Kavka proposes. However, Parfit believes that the life would have to be very bad for (2) to obtain. He says that (2) compares outcomes in which different numbers of people would be born, therefore, it has the wrong form for the Paradox of Future Individuals (pp. 116-122).

What is at stake is whether Kavka's rejection of laissez faire population growth based on his resolution of the Paradox of Future Generations can be sustained. If Parfit can show that the Paradox applies only to Same Number choices then Kavka's use of it with Different Number choices is incorrect.

But Kavka's slave child case only effects one person. Parfit cannot dismiss Kavka's case as not applicable on the grounds of form, when he himself says that minor variations in the number are not significant for the discussion at hand.

It is true that his examples and Kavka's are Same Number choices. But Same Number choices are not limited to exactly the same number. Parfit himself says, "There would of course be some difference in the numbers. But this we can morally ignore, since it would either not now be predictable, or would not be the feature which is morally important." (p. 122)

It appears that Parfit is assuming that the Paradox of Future Individuals only applies to Same Number choices since that is the only example he gives. If the Paradox is understood in this narrow sense, then there is a parallel and equally significant paradox in Different Number choices. If the Different Number choices are based on the fact that when the circumstances of procreation change then the persons change, then every single change in circumstances in world history means that generations of different individuals will be born. At what possible level can we draw some line regarding significance? Circumstances would only have to have been changed a little for Hitler or Alexander not to have existed. Yet the little change that would have effected their lives would have meant vastly different

circumstances for millions of people.

Also, the people who will be born at any given future time will include persons who would make significant differences in the lifestyles of their generation and generations to come. Therefore, the changes in any one individual's procreation could as well effect the very next generation significantly or insignificantly. There is no conclusive way to tell. We cannot minimize the level of significance of a change in any one person's life, for it may make very great changes, both for that individual and for those in contact with him.

This line of reasoning leads to the following conclusion: we cannot have an obligation to any specific generation to do anything differently than we would normally do, for as soon as we take any action to improve the conditions the initial set of persons change in both number and quality in ways we cannot know or control. It is the fact of change of persons that is crucial to the Paradox. In this sense whether there is change in the circumstances of one individual or in the circumstances of many individuals, if the changes effect who the individual is, then the Paradox holds. Thus, Parfit's second meaning (the life worth not living) of Kavka's final principle will not work in either case.

Parfit's second concern is in regard to the restricted life principle. When Kavka saw some of the problems with the maximizing principle he modified it by balancing it with another principle--the restricted life principle. Parfit would like to dismiss this principle, for he feels it complicates the over-all theory too much.

Kavka thought that because it allowed the couple to have the slave child that the maximizing principle could not be used as is and needed the balance of the restricted life principle. Parfit point out that this is true only if the maximizing principle claims to cover all of morality (p. 129). Therefore, he proposes a modified form of the maximizing principle that will be less ambiguous:

The Revised Maximizing Principle: if our choice is a necessary part of the cause of the existence of a person with a life worth living, our choice thereby benefits this person. Other things being equal, we ought to do what would benefit people most. In deciding how to do this, we must compare the benefits to the different people who, if we make different choices, would exist. We have no duty to benefit others when this would require from us too great a sacrifice. (pp. 127-128)

Parfit construes this principle as dealing only with the part of morality concerned with "beneficence, or the promoting of people's interests." (p. 129) The revised principle includes part of the restricted life principle (a life worth living) and a phrase that allows choice to be personally evaluated (other things being equal).

Parfit applies this principle to Kavka's slave child case. He says that it is permissible to remain childless, or, if they do have a child, the revised principle teaches that they should have free children. This would solve Kavka's case in keeping with our intuitive answer. Therefore, the revised principle works so far, and Kavka (Parfit thinks) would accept the revised principle (p. 132). Parfit states that the revised principle can criticise the choice in the Risky Policy case as well, and therefore seems to solve the Paradox.

Perhaps Kavka would agree. But this still has not resolved the case regarding use of the laissez faire principle in population growth issues. It only deals with one set of objections, Same Number cases. Even then it is not conclusive. Life often gives us choices that have only bad and worse alternatives. If the action I must take, say as a doctor, has no good alternatives (I cannot save the life or substantially ease the pain) then Parfit's revised principle presumably would not apply.

Part Two: The Total Value Principle

The original Maximizing Principle is insufficient to deal with all cases. Its insufficiency has nothing to do with the number of people involved. The problem is that on the surface only "good" benefit is taken into account. Thus, in the slave child case we would attribute good to the child (existence) and good to the parents (\$50,000). Kavka balances this by suggesting the restricted life principle. Parfit revises the maximizing principle to include elements from the restricted life idea and the idea that free choices cannot demand too great a sacrifice from us.

However, this has other problems. In the risky policy case Parfit approaches the situation as though it makes little difference whether we choose the risky policy or the safe policy. His statement of the benefit is that "the standard of living would be slightly higher." But in the

same case suppose the issue were one of survival for our generation at anywhere near the same standard of living, i.e. if we don't want to regress to a significantly less standard. This, we judge, would require too great a sacrifice from us (for example, if we had to give up the use of petroleum or coal, or some natural element used in the defense industry and were thus threatened by takeover by some other power). We would be freed from any obligation to follow the safe policy.

It is easily conceivable that our generation would choose the "better for now" policy (the risky policy), and hope that in the interval before the anticipated catastrophe we would find another solution. We seem to postpone pain or deprivation whenever possible. On these grounds it is possible to reject the safe policy in a situation that would be far short of survival for us, yet would possibly mean death for thousands of our descendants.

I suggest that, in light of the biblical teaching regarding protecting and preserving our God-given heritage (both spiritual and environmental - "it is good;"; "it is the Lord's") through and for our children, what is needed is a balance of the total good (both human and environmental but with the human valued greater), less the total harm, and comparison to other alternatives calculated on the same basis. I call this the **Total Value Principle**.

This principle could be related to the earlier distinction Parfit makes between a life not worth living and a life worth not living. The implication of the life not worth living is that a life may be so filled with such great pain/evil that it would not on balance be worth living. The second life is worth not living, i.e. there is more general pain/evil than good and, therefore, is not merely neutral but has negative value. Taking either of these into account is what I refer to by "total harm." On this principle we may need to accept a significantly lower standard of living in order to protect the existence of our descendants.

For comparison we shall apply the **Total Value Principle** to the slave child case. The benefits have been stated. The harm to the child would be living as a slave. The "worth" of this life style would to some extent be determined by the type of master and the living conditions the child would encounter. But our intuition tells us that slavery is in itself demeaning and to be avoided at considerable cost. In Parfit's terms this would be a life not worth living. The corresponding harm to the couple of not having this slave child would be not gaining \$50,000. A table of valuation might look like this:

A. Child as Slave

Slave Child Parents

Benefit will live will have money

Harm slavery none

B. Child not as Slave

No Slave Child Parents

Benefit none none

Harm none loss of money

The **Total Value Principle** helps us to set forth this table and can help us make a choice. Note that the first alternative lists no harm to

the parents. The benefit to the parents is the gain of money. In such cases we would weight the value of the child not being a slave (a life not worth living, a human value) as worth more than the money received (material enrichment of human life). In this case the second alternative would be preferred.

We need to test this principle against other issues. One which is both real and concerns future generations is the disposal of nuclear wastes. The United States at present is running into the problem of finding "safe" places to store nuclear wastes in ways which will not allow people to get at the wastes now or in the future. Dumping in the ocean has been proposed, but the full impact of this has not been determined. We shall evaluate this option using the above principles.

The benefit at present is the elimination of nuclear wastes. The costs are small, including: a container, transportation to a selected area over the ocean, periodic checks to see that there is no leakage. Any benefit to future generations is hard to imagine. The cost will include: regular checks on the accumulating containers, certain eventual leakage and need for repair or recontainment, and possible contamination of wide areas of the oceans with incalculable effects. This alternative may be summarized in the form of a table:

C. Ocean Deposit of Nuclear Wastes

Present Generation	Future Generation
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Benefit	get rid of wastes none
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Harm	low costs escalating costs, leakage possible planet wide damage
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Weighing the Total Value, it seems likely another alternative should be explored. This would also be true on the grounds of Kavka's Maximizing Principle. Using Parfit's Revised Maximizing Principle, we may well decide to pay the cost of continual checking and hope the potential widespread damage never occurs.

Suppose the following alternative were possible. Instead of dumping in the ocean, the containers will be launched into outer space with an initial trajectory which will dump the containers into the sun. After the container reaches outer space a small rocket separates the container from the main rocket and pushes it toward the sun. The main rocket can now be used for space construction or returned to earth for reuse. The cost for such sun-dumping would be higher than ocean dumping, but if valued sufficiently could be easily absorbed into the cost of providing nuclear power. The table for this alternative would be:

D. Sun-dumping of Nuclear Wastes

Present Generation	Future Generation
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Benefit	get rid of wastes none
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Harm	fairly high costs none
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The **Total Value Principle** can now be applied to evaluate the two alternatives.

In the two cases the primary differences concern the harms, not the benefits. With ocean dumping there is a trade of low costs now for potentially very high costs later. With sun-dumping there are higher costs now but no harms later. Since one of the potential harms is a loss of human life later, that harm must weigh significantly in the list. It seems reasonable that we should choose sun-dumping.

Since most environmental issues must take harms into account and since solutions are almost always a choice between two or more alternatives which must include weighing the benefits vs. harms of the alternatives, I conclude that Kavka's and Parfit's principles are insufficient in themselves to deal with environmental issues regarding future generations. The **Total Value Principle**, modified by Kavka's Restricted Life Principle, seems to match both our intuitions regarding these issues and the biblical data regarding obligations to future generations and the value of human life.

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