

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS?

by

Wendell Bell<sup>1</sup>

### PURPOSE

When asked to sacrifice for the well-being of future generations, some members of the present generation may reject the request with the retort, "What have future generations ever done for me?" They have a point, of course, because the usual motivations for cooperation and mutual caring among people, such as reciprocity and exchange, are absent. A present sacrifice for the welfare of future people appears to be a one-way street. On the face of it, people who will live a hundred or so years from now and beyond can do little or nothing of material worth for present people who, by then, will be dead.

Confronting such a view, how do futurists justify their concerns for the future and their distinctive commitment to speak for as yet voiceless future people? More important, how do they persuade the present generation to share their concern about the future and take present, possibly costly, action for the well-being of future people? To date, futurists have done important work in describing coming problems and opportunities ranging from military and political developments, energy, resources, and the environment to food production, health, and education. But, with a few exceptions (Tough, 1991), they have not given as much attention to the reasons why the present generation ought to care about a future that they will never live to see. Why, for example, ought present people save a forest now at the cost of their own livelihood and considerable pain and suffering for the sake of possibly providing a better life for people who may be living 100 or 500 years from now?

That question, of course, is related to the futurist purpose of inventing, examining, evaluating, and proposing not only probable and possible but also preferable futures. For asserting that a particular future is preferable invites some demonstration or evidence that it is so. Futurists have not adequately justified their images of preferable futures. In fact, the moral ideas that futurists use, usually implicitly, can withstand neither public scrutiny nor professional debate.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some reasons given by philosophers and other writers for the value assertion that present generations ought to care for the freedom and welfare of future gen-

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Wendell Bell is professor, Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

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erations. Putting aside religious views, I give seven different objective arguments. But first let's consider some options.

### DO FUTURE GENERATIONS DESERVE TO LIVE?

Humankind today has enormous power to affect the future, power that is unprecedented in history. We are capable of destroying the human future and destroying it forever. We are ravaging the planetary life-support system and we are putting it in jeopardy. Whatever "their tastes in music and poetry, or whatever their preferences in sports or other amusements, our descendants will need croplands and watersheds to supply their food and water, and they will need to be free of ultraviolet and nuclear radiation. [Of course, they need other things, too, including additional natural resources, sources of energy, and sufficient human cooperation to make social life possible.] And it is *these* necessities of future life and welfare that are in grave jeopardy *now* and we know this *now*" (Partridge, 1981a).

What ought we to do? One alternative is to do nothing for future generations. We could simply carry on wasting, polluting, dumping, exhausting, burning, and destroying the earth and its plants and creatures. Let posterity take care of itself when--or if--the future comes. Who cares about as yet unborn people who might or might not be alive on earth 500 or 5,000 or 10,000 years from now? Who other than a few loony futurists can think that far ahead anyway?

Perhaps, we ought to go further. Maybe the human race deserves to die. There is so much suffering in the world that it may be immoral to keep bringing new people into it only to add to the suffering. Even humans' best, most enlightened efforts will not relieve all the human suffering on earth, and most of the suffering that they can eliminate will not be relieved at once or within decades.

Then, too, much human behavior is abominable. People are sometimes greedy, stupid, cruel, ruthless, malicious, stingy, narrow-minded, unreasonable, and mean. They are sometimes downright evil in their behavior toward others. After millennia of human experience, there are still human beings everywhere on earth bent on hating, killing, torturing, maiming, raping, starving, cheating, or somehow hurting other human beings. Look at what was Yugoslavia, Somalia, the Sudan, Liberia, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, the streets of some of America's largest cities...the list goes on and on. If we knew that such human abominations would continue or would grow, if, for example, "we knew that future generations would inevitably descend into bestiality or a Hobbesian war of all against all, it might be reasonable for us to put an end to the species deliberately" (Kavka, 1981).

But we do not know these things. We insulate ourselves from the human evil of the world--and there is no evil other than *human evil*--by remembering the good that other humans have done and are

doing. We recall the heroes and exemplars of human history; the religious teachings of love, compassion, and justice; the sacrifices our parents and grandparents made for us; and the comradeship, affection, and love of our family, our friends, our neighbors, our teachers, and our small communities of mutual caring. The human condition is constituted in such memories.

And the human condition is also constituted in hope (Rolston, 1981). The meanings of our lives depend importantly on our visions for the future. Without the possibility of a future, there is nothing left but despair. Thus, if we give up on the future, we give up on ourselves. The ancient prophecy remains true: Where there is no vision, the people perish. One reason, then, why the present generation ought to be concerned about the well-being of future generations is that the continuation of humanity is necessary for present hope. The phasing out of the human species would "frustrate hopes, abort plans, disappoint expectations" (Bennett, 1978) and these things would hurt present people.

#### GROUNDS FOR CARING ABOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS

Moral relationships among generations are complex and have only recently become a topic of concerted philosophical effort. For example, Laslett and Fishkin (1992) point out that justice over time did not exist as a subject of analysis much before the 1970s and certainly not before the 1960s. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, was important in bringing the topic of obligations to future generations into modern philosophy and Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, published in 1984, is credited with advancing the topic further. Yet there may not as yet exist any fully adequate account of justice over time (Laslett, 1992).

Nonetheless, there are several specific arguments that provide evidence<sup>2</sup> for the value assertion that present generations ought to care for the well-being<sup>3</sup> of future generations, even the well-being of far-future generations with whom they cannot share a common life. I summarize some of them below:

- (1) *A concern for present people implies a concern for future people.* No clear demarcation exists between one generation and the next, thus a concern for people living now carries us a considerable way into caring about future people. We care--and we ought to care--about our own well-being. Some part of the near future includes ourselves. Therefore, caring for the near future is partly the responsible behavior of caring for ourselves. Let us not forget that each of us has such a primary responsibility.

Moreover, we care about our children and grandchildren, if we have them, because we love them. They will care about their children and grandchildren and they, in turn, will care about theirs. Thus, the chain of human connection and caring

continues unbroken into the future. For the members of any generation, at least some members of the next generation and even of the generation after that are already alive. Thus, if we care about them now, then our present caring includes their future well-being and their future concerns. As Laslett (1992) puts it, age groups "continuously intertwine with each other over the whole length of human history. They do so like the strands that wind round one another to create a piece of thread, each strand being shorter than the piece of thread itself, which unlike the strands is capable of indefinite extension."

The chain of obligation through time, moreover, means that we of the present generation wrong our existing children by making it difficult for them to fulfill their own obligations to their offspring in the future. Thus, our present enjoyment of high-consumption lifestyles, if it is at the expense of our children's ability to meet their future obligations, is morally wrong.

- (2) *Thought experiments in which choosers do not know to which generation they belong rationally imply a concern for both present and future people.* Let's perform a thought experiment following Rawls' (1971) theory of justice. Let's assume that we have some people who are "rational choosers" in an "original position" who have a "veil of ignorance" covering "in which generation they will live, now, in the near future, or the far future" (Barry, 1977). That is, people don't know when they will live and we ask them to choose how each generation ought to behave, consuming now or saving and preparing for the future.

Clearly, there is a question of possible equality or inequality in this experiment. It concerns differences among people of different generations. A chooser will "have to try to do the best for himself, allowing for the fact that if he comes early in history he will regret having chosen principles that demand too much saving; but if he comes late in history he will regret not having been rougher on resource depletion and damage to the environment. And so on" (Barry, 1978).

If our choosers are indeed rational, then their choice must allow for the well-being of both present *and* future generations. Thus, we ought to care about the well-being of future people because that is what rational people would choose to do if they did not know what generation they were in. This is assuming, of course, that people will not want to create a time, now or later, when it is impossible to live a satisfactory life for themselves.

With regard to questions of social justice, however, we need to be concerned, also, about distributing present sacrifices for the well-being of future generations equitably among presently living persons. Thus, some special consideration ought to be

given to the well-being of presently disadvantaged peoples (Green, 1977). For by consuming less, disadvantaged peoples pay a disproportionately high price for the well-being of future people.

- (3) *Regarding the natural resources of the earth, present generations have no right to use to the point of depletion or to poison what they did not create.* Future people are owed the use of "naturally self-renewing resources such as air, soil, and water" in an unpoisoned state (Baier, 1981). No human being produced these things, therefore everyone has a right to their use, including members of future generations. No one has the right to deny their use to others. Thus, the members of the present generation have an obligation to future generations of leaving the earth's life-sustaining capacities in as good a shape as they found them or of providing compensating benefits of life-sustaining worth equal to the damage that they do.

As Yeager (1991) points out, environmental protection has become a question of moral rights, "for example by linking the principle of equality of opportunity to the right to a decent environment, without which opportunity is compromised."

- (4) *Past generations left many of the public goods that they created not only to the present generation but to future generations as well.* Every generation is an heir to the legacies of past generations. Public goods from highways and television stations to school buildings and libraries to political and economic institutions to art and science were created or elaborated by past people and were inherited by present people. Such goods are part of the human heritage. No generation has the right to use up, totally consume, or destroy the existing human heritage, whether material, social, or cultural, so that it is no longer available to future generations. Thus, the present generation owes to future generations their share in these public goods (Baier, 1981).

To do the right thing, either present generations must act as stewards of their cultural heritage preserving or renewing it or they must act to replace it with works of equal or higher value.

One way in which present generations can compensate future generations for both the natural resources and the public goods that present people use up is to leave to future generations increased knowledge and technology, and therefore power, to deal with the changed world that they face. "We can empower future generations by spending part of our time creating knowledge and the technical skill and capacity to use it" (Partridge, 1981a). In the discussion of the damage that present generations do to the future well-being of coming generations, this point is often overlooked. Present generations can help make future generations better off as well as worse off. And they can do this not simply by conserving resources, but by using them to create knowledge that will bring new resources

into being and to develop new technologies to use them (e.g. there was no great demand for gasoline until after the invention, development, and spread of the internal combustion engine that used it for fuel).

Some resources are renewable (e.g. solar energy) or reusable (e.g. aluminum). But knowledge, as Kavka (1981) says, "is a usable resource that grows without being depleted and enables us to increase the output of the earth's physical resources." Kavka is referring especially to scientific and technological knowledge, but I see no compelling argument for such a limitation. All human knowledge, conceived very broadly to include art, literature, music, the social sciences, and philosophy as well as science and technology, could contribute positively to the well-being of future generations.

Moreover, I would include in the beneficial legacy that the present generation can leave: (1) foresight capabilities through the expansion of futures studies. With foresight, as every futurist would agree, we can more intelligently plan for our own future and better prepare the future of coming generations. And (2) critically examined, elaborated, and objectively justified moral codes by which alternative futures can be evaluated as to their desirability. For wisdom can come not only from better foresight but also from more appropriate values: Humans need to know what they want, to want the things that will in fact contribute to their present and future freedom and well-being, and to know and to be able to explain why they ought to want them. *Both foresight and moral judgment, for example, are needed in making decisions about the development and use of technology so that the results will be beneficial and not harmful.*

Kavka (1981) recognizes that the present generation faces vast investments in the development of currently poor countries. In order to stabilize the global population, for example, and to give every living human being a good chance at a long life of high quality, our generation may have to use what appears to be more than our fair share of resources. Kavka gives two justifications that would allow us to do so. The first is simply to make an exception. We must create the initial conditions that permit long and good lives for everyone and this may be a one time only extraordinary investment until every country has gone through the demographic revolution and, thus, has reached the point of slow or no population growth.

The second is to balance the books by considering the benefits of our spreading positive values into the future, such as, to continue the example of the control of population growth, values supporting a low-birth-rate zero-growth population. This strategy substitutes something of value (assuming a continuation of the threat of too many people) for the extra

resources we use. He says, treat "pronatal practices, institutions, and attitudes that we have inherited from our ancestors as a special kind of *negative* resource, so that our extra use of other resources would be balanced out if we eradicated this negative resource; we would be leaving our descendants as well off as we were left, all things considered." If our generation (or even the next one) could succeed in doing this, then, other things being equal, future generations would be considerably better off than they would be otherwise.

If each generation added to the store of human knowledge and wisdom, then the human species not only would increase its chances of having a future, but would also increase its chances of having a desirable future for millennia to come. Greater knowledge makes possible both the use of resources and the growth of resources.

- (5) *Humble ignorance ought to lead present generations to act with prudence toward the well-being of future generations.* Generally, moral responsibility grows with knowledge and foresight. If we know that the consequence of shooting a rifle aimed at a man is that he will be killed or badly hurt, then that knowledge makes us responsible for our act. Yet "paradoxically, in some cases grave moral responsibility is entailed by the fact of one's ignorance. If the planetary life-support system appears to be complex and mysterious, humble ignorance should indicate respect and restraint" (Partridge, 1981a).

Even though human knowledge has grown phenomenally during the last several generations, human ignorance remains vast. We do not understand everything about the biosphere. We have not even observed and classified all the forms of plant and animal life on earth, even as some species are becoming extinct. We do not know what all may be of use to future generations. We do not know what the human destiny is or might become. Weighted with such ignorance, the present generation ought to act prudently so as not to threaten the future survival and well-being of the human species. As Barry (1977) says, it would be a cosmic impertinence to do otherwise.

- (6) *There is a "prima facie obligation of present generations to ensure that important business is not left unfinished"* (Bennett, 1978). By "important business" Bennett refers to human accomplishments, especially exceptional ones in science, art, music, literature, and technology, and also human inventions and achievements of organizational arrangements, political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, and moral philosophy. The continuation of these achievements, obviously, depends upon the continuation of the human species. They depend, too, on a quality of life that is sufficiently high so that at least some future individuals will be free from mere survival activities and able to concentrate their energies on such ventures.

The human story to date has only been partially told. We do not know what its ending will be. Nor do we know what it ought to be. The narrative of humankind disappears into the future. So far, it has included many wonders of accomplishment, from architecture to poetry and from acts of grace to acts of courage. Surely, we can learn to live well in the present while at the same time creating conditions for the human story to continue.

- (7) *The present generation's caring and sacrificing for future generations benefits not only future generations but also itself.* "If our ethical concern can evolve to equal our awesome modern capacities to help and to hurt, around the globe and across generations,...we would no doubt find new truth in the old moral paradox that a concern for others benefits one's own character" (Rolston, 1981). Elaborating on this theme, Partridge (1981b) postulates a need for self transcendence as a basic fact of the human condition. Self transcendence, he says, includes the need "of a well-functioning person to care for the future beyond his own lifetime." The reverse side of this claim is "that individuals who lack a sense of self transcendence are acutely impoverished in that they lack significant, fundamental, and widespread capacities and features of human moral and social experience." Thus, it is through being concerned for other people, both living and as yet unborn, that a person achieves self-enrichment and personal satisfaction.

The idea of a human need for self transcendence speaks to the despair of the modern, secular peoples of the world. Modern life (and I include "post-modern" life), shorn of religious certainties, offers relatively little guidance with respect to fundamental values. It undermines beliefs in universal rights and wrongs and leads to cynicism that erodes morality and creates a value gap.

As Baumeister (1991) points out, "A major part of the modern response to this value gap is to elevate selfhood and the cultivation of identity into basic, compelling values. But if we rely on the quest for identity and self-knowledge to give life meaning, we make ourselves vulnerable to death in an almost unprecedented way. The self comes to an end in death, and it ceases to give value. Thus death takes away not only our life but also what gave it value. In contrast, our ancestors typically drew comfort from values that would outlive them." As he says further, "If one has devoted one's life to the cultivation, exploration, and glorification of the self, then death will render one's life futile and pointless."

Genuinely caring about future generations and taking effective action to benefit their well-being are objective and rational answers to the contemplation of one's own death and the feelings of futility and despair it produces. Thus, we can



strengthen ourselves by creating a community of hope, as Bellah et al. (1985) have called it, connecting "our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good," as we extend and continue ourselves into the future through our concerns for others. "By fulfilling our just duties to posterity, we may now earn and enjoy, in our self-fulfillment, the favors of posterity" (Partridge, 1981b).

## DISCOUNTING THE FUTURE

Generally, economists discount the future, while philosophers do not (Cowen and Parfit, 1992). We can find some truth in each point of view. What is needed is balance, a concern both for the immediate present *and* for the future. The interests of both present and future generations need to be taken into account.

One good reason to discount the future somewhat is its uncertainty. We know less about the future than we do about the past and the present. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" because if you give up the certain one for the uncertain two you may end up with none. Alternative scenarios about what the future will be are necessarily contingent and cannot all come true. Many scenarios may not even come close to what the future will actually be like when it arrives.

Moreover, the more distant into the future we go, the more uncertain it may become and, possibly, the more negligible are the effects of present acts. For example, the present generation cannot control the actions of intervening generations of people, so present planning for the far future is subject to unknown possible interventions. Yet we must judge each case on its own merits, because some "effects are predictable even in the distant future. Nuclear wastes may be dangerous for thousands of years. And some acts have permanent effects," such as the destruction of a species (Cowen and Parfit, 1992).

Also, the present generation cannot even be certain that future generations will need what it may save for them (Passmore, 1981). Then, too, the present generation could even make future generations worse off by its misguided efforts to benefit them since its present knowledge is often so limited, while its hubris is often boundless.

And, finally, future generations may be so much more knowledgeable and powerful than the present generation that they may be quite capable of taking care of themselves.

But there is another side of the coin. Even in our own lifetimes, if we never act to benefit our own futures, we may live to have an impoverished future ourselves. If we never sacrifice in the present by deferring gratification, then we may have nothing left for our future. For example, if we never study and learn, if we never defer

playing for work, if we never put off a pleasure now for a greater pleasure later, if we never save for our retirement, if we never plan, then we may never accomplish anything of worth in our own lives and may live with regret and suffering in the future. In like manner, if present generations never concern themselves with the well-being of future generations, then future generations may end up powerless to survive at all, much less thrive.

At a discount rate of five percent per year, one death this year is equal to over two million deaths 300 years from now. Although economists may find this to be an acceptable trade-off, philosophers may find it morally repugnant. A human life is a human life, whether now or in the future. And a duty is a duty. The time dimension of a duty (present or future) does not matter (Partridge, 1981a). And, despite our ignorance, we now know that many of the consequences of current human behavior *are* damaging the environment and *are* hurting present people and we now know that they will continue to hurt people at least into the near future.

The best policy may be one of giving first priority to the alleviation of present suffering and maximizing the freedom and welfare of living people, making it possible for members of the present generation to live out their life spans in good health and happiness. But we ought to do so with a genuine concern about the consequences of our actions, both intended and unintended, for the well-being of future generations as well.

The interests of present and future generations do not always clash. Often they merge and both can be beneficially served by the same actions. For example, reducing pollution, distributing food, expanding the delivery of health services, educating people, lowering high-birth-rate reproductive behavior, inventing and disseminating effective contraceptives, creating institutions to promote peaceful and democratic governance and to ensure personal security and social justice, investing in public goods of transportation and communication, reducing noise, encouraging recycling, preventing wasteful uses of resources, investing in research and development, maintaining social order and peaceful change, teaching the benefits of cooperation, spreading the values of concern for the global community, etc. are "double benefit" forms of action (Passmore, 1981). Often, they help present generations *and* they probably will help future generations as well.

Finally, we ought to behave now so as to keep as many options open for the future as possible. Other things being equal, we cannot harm the interests of future generations by "our leaving them more choices rather than fewer" (Barry, 1977).

We do not want to make the Marxist mistake of doing certain harm to present people in the name of future happiness that may never come (Bell, 1991). Certain misery for uncertain happiness may or may not be a wise choice, but morally it can only be made by allowing informed, voluntary consent on the part of those people

who are now to be made miserable. Nor do we want to make the mistake of living for today with no thought of the future. Present happiness in exchange for probable future misery is a false choice, because without hope for the future, as we have seen, the present itself becomes meaningless.

Thus, a balance between the interests of present and future people is the moral choice, with a strong preference for those actions that have the double benefit of helping both present and future people have a longer and better life. Given the basic needs of both present and future people (e.g. for clean air, water, and soil), the life-sustaining capacities of the earth and the continued existence of plants and animals are obviously part of fundamental human concern, both now and in the future.

### OBLIGATIONS TO THE PAST

I have addressed the question of whether or not we of the present generation have obligations to future generations. After reviewing seven reasons, I concluded that, indeed, we do. But justice over time, obviously, can extend not only into the future, but also into the past. Thus, another question immediately comes to mind: Do we also have obligations to past generations?

Given current philosophical thinking, the answer is, perhaps yes, some, but they are not nearly as many nor as compelling as our obligations to future generations. Thus, the past can be morally discounted in a way that the future ought not to be. The difference in our commitments to the past and the future derives directly from the fact that the past has already happened and we can do nothing now to change it and the future is yet to come and importantly depends on present actions (Bell and Olick, 1989). Although we can change our images of the past, we cannot change the past itself (which is an entirely different matter). Thus, morally, we cannot be expected to do that which we are unable to do.

Yet the living do, in fact, fulfill many commitments to the dead. They bury them, honor them, carry out their wishes (e.g. follow the directions of their last wills and testaments), tell their stories, carry on their unfinished work, remember them, and otherwise acknowledge and mark their existence and accomplishments. Fulfilling such commitments to past people, as in the case of caring for future people, can result in benefits to the living. "In acquiring, reflecting, and acting with historical consciousness and conscience, we may favor ourselves with a sense of transcending involvement and worth" (Partridge, 1981a). Although the river of life, like time, flows only in one direction, remembering the past, like anticipating the future, helps to give meaning to the present.

There are two reasons why we ought not to give as much concern to the dead as to the living and the unborn. The first is that "nearly all of the desires of the dead concerned matters in their own lifetimes

that are now past and cannot be changed" (Kavka, 1981). The second is that, even when the desires of the dead concerned future states of affairs, they are no longer around to "experience satisfaction in their fulfillment or disappointment in their non-fulfillment." Thus, "it is reasonable to downgrade the importance of these desires (and perhaps ignore them altogether) in our moral decision making."

Neither of these reasons, obviously, applies to presently living people. Nor do they apply to future people. Members of the present generation *are* in a position to act to make it more likely that many of the desires of future people will be satisfied, and future people *will* be around to experience the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of their desires" (Kavka, 1981).

Thus, the difference in their temporal location constitutes a reason for favoring both present and future people over past people. But it "does not constitute a reason for favoring present over *future* people" (Kavka, 1981). Both present and future people, as we have seen, have rightful claims on the earth's natural resources and cultural heritages.

When the beliefs and values of our dead ancestors clash with the freedom and welfare of present and future generations, then they ought to be abandoned and replaced by new beliefs and values that contribute positively to freedom and welfare, now and in the future. By thus changing our beliefs and values, one major obligation to past generations will be served: We will have helped to ensure that human life has a future, that the river of life will continue to flow.

There is at least one special case that deserves separate consideration. It is when present people may deserve compensation for the effects on them of past, perhaps ancient, wrongs to their forebears. In the United States, for example, ought African-Americans today be somehow compensated for the forced slavery and transportation of their ancestors and ought Native Americans be compensated for the "appropriations of land and life from their ancestors?" (Sher, 1992).

Although we cannot right all the wrongs of history, some compensation may be fair, going back one or more generations. But Sher (1992) argues that the merit of such compensations fades with time. One reason is that the more time that has elapsed between the past wrong to an ancestor and a descendent's present circumstances, the more likely it is that a descendent's present circumstances are the result, not of the past wrong, but of his or her or other people's intervening actions. "Where the initial wrong was done many hundreds of years ago, almost all of the difference between the victim's entitlements in the actual world and his [or her] entitlements in a [hypothetical] rectified world can be expected to stem from the actions of various intervening agents in the two alternative worlds" (Sher, 1992).

Of paramount importance, to continue the examples, are the wrongs that may be being done to African-Americans or Native Americans today in their own lifetimes. Present and recent acts of

discrimination and neglect demand our present concern and invite immediate redress.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When asked by present-oriented skeptics why they ought to be concerned about the freedom and welfare of future generations, futurists have some answers. In this paper, I have considered seven:

1. A concern for present people implies a concern for future people.
2. Thought experiments in which choosers do not know to which generation they belong rationally imply a concern for both present and future people.
3. Regarding the natural resources of the earth, present generations have no right to use to the point of depletion or to poison what they did not create.
4. Past generations left many of the public goods that they created not only to the present generation but to future generations as well.
5. Humble ignorance ought to lead present generations to act with prudence toward the well-being of future generations.
6. Present generations have a prima facie obligation to ensure that important human business is not left unfinished. And, finally:
7. The present generation's caring and sacrificing for future generations benefits not only future generations but also itself.

The moral choice appears to be a balance between the interests of both present and future generations: an obligation, first, to strive to create the conditions that permit an equal and good chance of every presently living person to live a long (80-100 years) and good life, and, second, an effort to leave future generations at least as well off as we of the present generation so that they, too, can live long and good lives. Being morally responsible means caring for ourselves, for each other in the present, and for others in the future.

Further, because the interests of present and future generations do not always clash but sometimes are convergent, we can search for those present acts and policies that contribute to the well-being both of present and future people. Such "double benefits" often come from acts that maintain and enhance the life-sustaining capacities of the earth. They also can come from research, technological development, and scholarship, leaving future people increased knowledge, and, therefore, increased power to control the conditions of their own lives. They can also come from advances in moral discourse so that both present and future people will have the good judgment and wisdom to use technological developments for life enhancing purposes and not for destruction.

A maxim that surely will help rather than hurt future generations

is to increase the range and number of future possibilities, alternatives, and choices. The moral choice is to take those present actions, as far as possible, that are not irreversible but that increase future options.

Furthermore, both power and choice are false values unless they are shared by people at every level of society. Thus, the moral choice is to work toward democratic systems that encourage free and fair participation in decision-making, so that all people can participate substantively in those decisions that shape their lives. And, since neither power nor participation by themselves will necessarily lead to informed and moral choices and acts, universal global education, including the principles of moral discourse, considerably beyond what now is available may be a precondition for creating people willing to act to preserve their collective future. Thus, the community of human concern, already being enlarged to include all people currently alive on earth, can be expanded further to include future generations.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, I have tried to show that, although we of the present generation have obligations to both past and future generations, our obligations to future people are far greater than are our obligations to past people.

#### NOTES

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2. Elsewhere (Bell, 1993), I have given a summary of epistemic implication (Lee, 1985) which is a method for the objective assessment of value assertions. Using it, a researcher can assess the validity of "ought" statements, including moral "ought" statements. Although I have not made it explicit, it has guided this discussion.

3. By "well-being," I refer, following Lombardi (1988), to two sets of considerations. The first is "human welfare," ranging from sheer physical survival (e.g., health, use of limbs); to physical well-being (e.g., absence of pains, opportunities for sex and exercise); to emotional or psychological well-being (e.g., absence of phobias, satisfaction of emotional needs); to aesthetic and intellectual pleasures (e.g., musical and dramatic performances, learning how the solar system works). The second is human freedom, from the ability to develop options (e.g., needs for educational training and equal access to jobs and resources), to the ability to deliberate and choose (e.g., needs for having relevant and accurate information and truth telling),

to the ability to carry out a decision once it has been made (e.g., needs for absence of force, threats, or other interference). Lombardi derives both sets of considerations from the nature of human beings.

4. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the possible concrete actions and organizational tools that can be used to implement concerns for the well-being of future people, but one attractive proposal was recently made by Tonn (1991). He proposed an amendment to the US Constitution to establish a "Court of Generations" whose purpose would be to safeguard the lives of future generations by judging present actions. Expanding on his idea, we can imagine a court similarly charged on the international level, perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations and with some power to implement its judgments, a Whole-Earth Court of Generations.

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