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Ontology and the Paradox of Future Generations

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Abstract. The following three propositions are inconsistent: (I) We have moral obligations to future generations, (II) Future generations do not exist, (III) In order to have moral obligations to X, X must exist. All three propositions are *prima facie* plausible. There are really two paradoxes here, one for obligations involving moral rights, and another for moral duties. The paper argues that (II) and (III) are true, thus (I) is false—we have no moral obligations to future generations. The paper considers the available views on the ontology of future generations, as well as various versions of Parfit's person-affecting principle, by way of defending the plausibility of (II) and (III), respectively.

Key words: future generations, future people, possible people, person-affecting principle.

I have various moral obligations to people in the present. I am obligated to see to it that my five-year old daughter is fed, loved, played with, tended to when she is upset, and so on. I am also obligated not to poke her with pins or otherwise cause her unnecessary immediate harm. I also have various obligations to presently existing people with respect to the future. I am obligated to see to it that my daughter receives her vaccinations on time, is not left in the care of adults of questionable character, and so on, where such obligations involve the prevention of future harms to a presently existing person. Furthermore, I presumably have obligations to her that involve the future of eighty years from now. I ought to plan for her college education, for instance, since that seems necessary for living the good life by age eighty. I also ought to vote for political candidates that share my views on how the future ought to go, for my daughter's sake. I also ought not waste natural resources or pollute the environment, and I should encourage others to think similarly. Such obligations are all by way of my being obligated to prevent harms from occurring to my daughter in the future of eighty years from now. This much seems uncontroversial.

Suppose my daughter will have a daughter herself. Do I have moral obligations to her, my granddaughter? *Prima facie*, it seems so—all of my obligations to my daughter of age eighty five would seem to apply to my granddaughter as well. Just as I ought not waste natural resources due to its harm to my daughter eighty years from now, it seems I have the same obligation to my granddaughter who will also exist eighty years from now. By extension, it seems I have many obligations to whole generations of people who don't exist now, but will exist in the future. But there is an important difference between my eighty-five-year old daughter in 2091 and my granddaughter in 2091: My daughter exists now, and my granddaughter doesn't. My granddaughter's nonexistence seems to discount her from my having obligations to her, one might infer, since we have no obligations to nonexistent things generally. I have no obligations to my presently existing sons, since I have none of those, and one might think that since my granddaughter doesn't exist, I have no obligations to her either. One might then infer that by extension, I have no obligations

to whole generations of people who do not exist. And that is exactly the conclusion I shall draw here.

I. TWO INCONSISTENCIES INVOLVING FUTURE GENERATIONS

We are caught in a paradox, it seems: It seems we have moral obligations to people in the future, and those people do not exist. Yet it also seems that in order to have obligations to something, that thing must exist. Put more formally, it appears that we are confronted with two different versions of what one might call *the paradox of future generations*. One of the paradoxes is formulated in terms of our having duties to future generations, and the other is put in terms of the rights of future generations. The duty-based version of the paradox runs as follows.

(I) We have duties to future generations.

(II) Future generations do not exist.

(III) In order to have a duty to *X*, *X* must exist.

Claims (I)-(III) are inconsistent, it appears, and thus at least one of them is false. Yet each of (I)-(III) looks plausible when isolated from the others. The rights-based version involves a similar collection of claims:

(I)' Future generations have rights.

(II)' Future generations do not exist.

(III)' In order for *X* to have rights, *X* must exist.

(I)'-(III)' also appear to be inconsistent, and thus at least one of them must be false as well. And just as with the first set of claims, each of (I)' -(III)' has some degree of plausibility.

The two paradoxes are independent. For instance, to some authors (I)' would present itself as a fairly obvious claim to reject.[1] But even if the second paradox has a resolution, (I)-(III) still are problematic. For one might take the view that we have duties to future generations, even if they have no rights, much like would be the case if we have duties to the natural environment itself, though perhaps it has no rights of its own.

My own thesis here is that with respect to both paradoxes, the first claim in each set is false. We have no duties to future generations, and future generations have no rights. The argument for these claims is fairly simple. The respective sets of propositions are inconsistent, and the second and third claim in each set is true. Thus the first claim in each set is false. Yet others might prefer to reject the second and/or third claim in each set, and such options are the focus of the remainder of the paper. In trying to resolve the paradoxes

1] See Macklin 1981 for a defense of such a denial, and see Partridge 1990 for criticism. See also de-Shalit 1995, Ch. 5 for discussion.

by rejecting (II) (which is the same as (II)', of course), one must defend a view of the ontology of future generations themselves, where such a view takes future generations to exist. Those options are explored below, though my contention is that all of them fail as plausible views of the ontology of future generations. Others might aim to resolve the paradoxes by rejecting (III) and/or (III)' by way of defending a different principle governing what an entity's ontological status must be in order to be the object of duties or the bearer of rights. I aim to show that one defense of the most obvious alternatives to (III) and (III)' fails to require the falsity of (III) and (III)', and thus the paradoxes are not met by that strategy. Less-than-obvious alternatives to (III) and (III)' are neither offered nor considered here, with the challenge being left to defenders of those alternatives to make their case.

Some notes by way of clarification are in order. First, different senses of the term 'future generation' will be employed below, depending on different views on the ontology of them. Nevertheless, throughout the paper the term refers only to collections of future people, however they should be characterized, where those future people do not also exist in the present. It seems that the term is used often enough to include presently existing beings too—we are members of both a present *and* a future generation, one might think—though for this paper I only speak of future generations that are remote in the sense of not overlapping with the present generation. Such remote or distant future generations do not include any of us. Second, 'exist' is meant in its straightforward, usual sense—To say that *X* exists is to say that *X* exists *now*, or that *X persists through time*, including the present. At least *prima facie*, future generations do not exist in this sense.

II. STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE PARADOXES

There are numerous ways one might address the paradoxes. One that I will not address at length is the possibility that the paradoxes arise due to some equivocation that takes place in (I)-(III) and (I)'-(III)', respectively, and thus that the sets of propositions in question are consistent after all. I set such strategies aside here, and grant that my overall conclusions might need to be rethought if such a maneuver is available. I intend to stick instead to the strategy of considering denials of one or another member of (I)-(III) and (I)'-(III)'.[2]

First option: Deny (I) and/or (I)'

Though my own preferred way to resolve the paradoxes is to deny the first claim in each set of propositions, it is worth noting that denying (I) and (I)' is to claim that we have no obligations to particular future generations and their members. (I) and (I)' are *prima facie* plausible claims, to be sure. In fact, to deny that we have moral obligations to future

2] In my concluding section, I consider drawing a distinction between two general types of duties, but this is not to suggest a solution to the paradoxes (or at least the duty-based one) based on exposing an equivocation in the statement of the paradox itself.

generations would seem to give up on the prospects for obligations to prevent or avoid bringing about various kinds of harms that will occur in the distant future. Surely there can be such obligations, so denying (I) is counterintuitive, one might think.

Perhaps one might deny (I) (and/or (I)') and still hold out for a view allowing for obligations involving harms that will occur in the distant future. For one might reject the notion of an obligation to future generations in favor of obligations to *future people* (construed as people who do not exist now, but will exist in the future), or at least to espouse a view allowing for obligations to future people without obligations to *generations* of them. But the same sort of paradox threatens. For it seems inconsistent to hold that (i) we have moral obligations to future people, (ii) future people do not exist, and (iii) in order to have a moral obligation to *X*, *X* must exist. Furthermore, given that future generations themselves are defined in terms of future people, with different notions of the ontology of future generations tied to different notions of the ontology of future people, such a strategy of denying (I) and/or (I)' fails to resolve the basic logical problem. Readers might be incredulous at this point, thinking that surely, surely we can have obligations to distant future generations that admittedly do not exist. The final section of this essay will attempt to take some of the sting out of this, while preserving the basic intuition that I have to some degree as well.

Second option: Deny (II)

The second option seems to be the most popular, and that is to deny claim (II) (and/or (II)', though for the remainder of this section I'll only make explicit mention of claim (II)). Denying (II) entails holding that future generations exist. There are a number of further options here, corresponding to different views on the ontology of future generations themselves. That is, if one aims to escape the paradox by denying (II), one must defend a view of future generations that treats them as existent things. On such a view, 'Future generations exist' or 'There are future generations' has to come out true.

The options, as I see them, are as follows. A particular future generation is either

(a) a collection of future people existing at some particular future time *t*, where none of those people exist presently, though they are nevertheless real,

(b) a collection of people potentially existing now, who will exist at a future time *t*,

(c) a collection of ontologically possibly existing people, where those people will exist at a future time *t*,

(d) a collection of imaginary people existing at some future time *t*,

(e) a "useful fiction," in the same sense as instrumentalists treat theoretical terms in the sciences, or

> (f) a set, considered as an abstract entity, of "placeholders" or "offices" that are not filled by any presently existing people, but will be filled by some people at a future time *t*.

My contention is that all of options (a)-(f) fail as views that allow for denying (II). That is, none of (a)-(f) allow for future generations to exist in any meaningful sense such that they can be the objects of moral duties, nor do they allow for future generations to exist as bearers of moral rights.

Strategy (a). On the first option, one takes a static or eternalist view of time to be correct, and future generations thus can exist just as the present and the past does. Since all times are equally real on such eternalist (or four-dimensionalist) views, future generations (and their constituent future people) are as real as you and I are. Given that they are real, there is no ontological problem with respect to our having moral obligations to them, one might think—we can have duties to particular future people, and those future people can have rights.[3]

One might grant the move, and take the remainder of this essay conditionally: If eternalism is correct, then the paradox might be solved by rejecting proposition (II). Eternalism is certainly not the only view of time, of course. And some of the others, if true, are not friendly to rejecting (II) since they reject the thesis that the future is real. A dynamic view of time such as presentism is in that camp, holding that the present exhausts everything that is real. On that view, future generations neither exist nor are real in any meaningful sense of the term. Another dynamic view, such as that of Tooley (1997), holds that the past and present are real but the future is not. On such a view, once again future generations neither exist nor are real in any meaningful sense.

Yet I can set aside the dispute between static and dynamic views of time, which is obviously beyond the scope of the present project. For there is an equivocation being exploited by strategy (a). Consider 'exist' in (II). '*X* does not exist', in the sense of 'exist' in (II), expresses the proposition that *X* does not *presently* exist. Suppose I say 'My eighty-year-old daughter exists'. Say I insist this is true since I think a static view of time is true, and because I have good reason to believe that my daughter will live to be eighty five. Such a claim obviously equivocates on 'exist', for it is not the sense of 'exist' being used in (II), and by extension strategy (a) fails.

Strategy (b). On this option, future generations are sets of potentially existent people, where such potential people are currently existent. A particular future generation that

3] For example, Quine (1987) embraces this strategy: "[T]he four-dimensional view resolves the dilemma [namely our paradox of future generations]. On that view, people and other things of the past and future are as real as those of today, where 'are' is taken tenselessly as in 'Two and two are four'. People who will be born are real people, tenselessly speaking, and their interests are to be respected now and always (74-75)."

will exist at a later time *t*, then, is a collection of presently existing potential people[4] that will exist at *t*.

There are two difficulties to consider with respect to strategy (b). First, there look to be rather serious problems concerning personal identity here. It might seem unobjectionable to deny beings such as month-old fetuses the status of being actual persons, but grant them the status of potential persons. As such potential persons are nevertheless actual things, (III) does not rule out having obligations to such things. Similarly, (III)' does not rule out their having rights. One might then think that the same sort of consideration applies to members of distant future generations as well.

But for members of such future generations, who at any rate have not even been conceived yet, it is difficult to see how such beings could exist now as potential persons. The *matter* of those beings (though not in the Aristotelian sense of 'matter') is existent now, surely, as various collections of presently existing matter scattered around the universe will be organized into persons in the future. But we have no obligations to such collections of presently existing matter, and nor do such collections of matter have rights.

The second problem is that strategy (b) assumes that potential but nonactualized people would be such that we have moral obligations to them as if they were actual already. Take the rights-based version of the paradox. For resolving that paradox, the strategy assumes that potential but nonactualized people have the rights had by *actual* people. But the assumption is incorrect. I am potentially a septuagenarian. In my state, senior citizens receive a 1% sales tax discount with the presentation of proper ID—that benefit is their right to claim. I cannot claim that benefit, since I am presently under age forty. It will do no good for me to complain to the cashier that I am *potentially* a septuagenerian, and thus in some morally relevant sense I *am* a septuagenerian who has the right to the discount. Similarly, the cashier has no duties to me qua potential septuagenerian to grant me the discount, for the simple reason that I am not actually a septuagenerian. My potentially being a septuagenerian does not confer the rights had by septuagenarians on me, nor does it entail that others have septuagenerian-related duties to me. So strategy (b) fails.

Strategy (c). Perhaps the most common view of future generations (at least in the literature) is that future generations are sets of ontologically possibly existing people, where such people could exist in the future, given the present state of the world.[5]

Following Carter (2001), future generations cannot be sets of *logically possible people*, for such people need not be causally related to the present, actual world. My logically pos-

4] On potential persons, see Warren 1981, in Partridge 1981. Of course, what it is that presently exists that is potentially a person is unclear—e.g., on Aristotelian notions of potentiality, the only things that would be potential people would be those "seeds" of people that have been "planted" and undergone some sort of change. Without some sort of qualifications like these, nearly *anything* could count as a potential person. This difficulty needs resolving in order for strategy (b) to succeed.

5] The treatment of a future person as a species of a possible person originated with Parfit, at least according to Macklin (1981). The terminology of ontological possibility, and the characterization of it given here, is from Carter 2001.

sible future harems, for instance,[6] may include hundreds of members, but unless such possible people are causally related to the actual world, I have no obligations to them. In short, the mere fact that it is possible that various people will exist in the future entails no moral claims with respect to them, unless such possibilities are consequences (or at least likely consequences) of present states of affairs.

Future generations also cannot be sets of *epistemologically possible people* either, for much the same reason. An epistemologically possible person is a person who might exist, for all I know. But what might happen, or who might exist, *for all I know,* need not be causally related to present states of affairs at all. Again, without such a connection, such possibilities are irrelevant to our present obligations.[7]

Now to how strategy (c) fails. Conceiving future generations as sets of ontologically possibly existing people still seems to admit them to be nonexistent, unless one equivocates on 'exists', thus making the strategy not a denial of (II) at all. To deny (II), one must take such possible people to be existent (or real, if one draws a distinction between what is real and what is existent). Thus the strategy is committed to possibilism, where according to possibilism, there are nonactualized possible things in addition to the actual ones. The view is far from new (its most well-known proponents being Alexius Meinong and David Lewis). Criticisms of the view are also far from new—one important criticism, tuned to the present discussion, is the so-called *problem of relevance*. If the objection is decisive, then strategy (c) fails.

The events in some possible world have no relevance to the events here in the actual world, the objection begins. Even if in some possible world, there is a being that looks like me, has my name, has my characteristics, and so on, and is also the king of England, that is irrelevant to the modal facts about me. Furthermore, it seems absurd to think that we in the actual world can have duties to those individuals existing in other possible worlds. Again, there may be someone in another possible world that looks like me, has my characteristics, and so on, and that person has a quite sizable harem (and perhaps is the king of England too, for that matter). I have no obligations to the members of that harem existing in another possible world—that seems obvious. And even if they have rights, it is absurd to think that *I* can violate their rights from here in the actual world.

One might think that in such cases that really is *me* in those other possible worlds, and so I can have various duties toward members of the harem in question, and I can really violate their rights. But this is to presume that I am a transworld individual, existing in multiple possible worlds, and there are no such things. That being in another possible world that is the king of England with the sizable harem is not *me*—it is someone else, even on a possibilist view of things.

6] The example is from an unpublished paper by Stuart Rosenbaum (qtd. in Partridge 1990).

7] Again, see Carter 2001, 434.

For other actual beings (such as actual middle eastern princes and so on), such future harems might be quite likely,[8] and such appeals to possible people makes more sense. Yet even in those cases (1) they are still possible beings, not actual ones, and it is impossible that *they* will become actual. They are possible beings residing in another possible world. (2) If those possible harem members are the same people as the ones who are later actual harem members, then when members of those likely harems become actual, it would mark a point where a nonactualized possible being, existing in another possible world, *becomes* a being in the actual world. Possible beings do not become actual beings, strictly speaking, since once again, nonactualized possible people are isolated from the actual world.

One also cannot appeal to causal relations here, perhaps by proposing that various possible states of affairs are the effects (or likely effects) of the events here in the actual world. For again, on standard versions of possibilism, possible worlds are isolated from one another. A cause in the actual world cannot have an effect in a world distinct from the actual one, even if that possible world contains ontologically possible people, in Carter's sense. Thus strategy (c) fails.

Strategy (d). The next strategy takes future generations as sets of imaginary people. Though some authors have taken this tack with respect to the language used to address the problem at hand (such as Partridge (1990)), I doubt that they truly mean to say that future generations and future people are *imaginary*. First (as with the preceding strategy), imaginary things are nonexistent, and hence such a move is not to deny (II). Yet suppose one granted for sake of argument that imaginary things enjoy some sort of existence, different from the status that you and I have, but somehow existent. What sort of existence might that be? The most obvious answer is that imaginary "things" exist as mental representations of those things, and thus that imaginary "things" are mental particulars on the order of ideas. Just as Santa Claus and unicorns don't enjoy any extra-mental existence, they might be said to "exist in the mind". But to take such mental particulars as things that have rights, or as things to which we have duties, is a category mistake. My mental representations have no rights, and neither you nor I owe my mental representations anything.

Perhaps (d) might be blended with the strategy of treating future generations as being constituted by possible people, insofar as one might hold the view that identifies nonactualized possible people with imaginary people. But this runs into the difficulties just mentioned concerning treating imaginary people as mental entities, and one more: '*X* is a possible person iff *X* is an imaginary person' is false. For what is possible is not the same as what is imaginary. Some things are possible but not imaginary, due to our own cognitive deficiencies in being able to imagine them, and due to some possible states of affairs' not being represented imagistically. Moreover, some things are imaginary but not possible, as some sorts of artwork might suggest.[9]

8] See Partridge 1990, 52.

9] See Sorenson 2002 for discussion of the last point.

Strategy (e). The next option takes future generations to exist as "useful fictions," much like an instrumentalist treatment of theoretical entities in the sciences. Yet if such future generations "exist" as useful fictions, they still are fictions, and hence do not exist. This would fail to be a denial of (II), and thus would fail to address either paradox. But it seems that however it is that fictional entities might exist, it seems false that one could have moral obligations to them. Extending our obligations to fictional entities is odd indeed—one cannot violate Hamlet's rights, nor do we have any duties to preserve the genetic stock of unicorns.

A more subtle objection is that the analogy being drawn with theoretical terms in the sciences breaks down. For while it is true that theoretical language in the sciences can still be useful for making predictions even if such language fails to correspond to reality, the usefulness of the language of future generations is not of that sort. The analogy in question can be stated thusly: Electrons are to future people as predictions about the future are to statements of obligation to future people. Statements about future states of the physical world and statements of obligation to future people are indeed both about the future, but there the similarity ends, it seems. But even if the analogy is good, it still follows that future generations turn out to be nonexistent, just as electrons turn out to be nonexistent on an instrumentalist treatment of them.

Strategy (f). The last option to consider treats future generations as abstract sets of placeholders or offices not currently filled, but that will be filled in the future. The idea is that the sets of offices themselves are presently existent, even if they are not presently filled, and thus can be objects of moral obligation. The strategy is committed to our being obligated to something not constituted by things that presently have rights, or that presently are such that we have duties to them. On (f), we can be obligated to things that are not persons, and not even cognizant beings, at all. However, if one recasts the overall discussion here in terms of moral *standing*, instead of in terms of rights and duties, then the strategy is more plausible. For consider other things that would seem to have moral standing, or moral worth, or at any rate can be *harmed* in a morally significant sense, even if they are not themselves fully constituted by actual moral persons. Perhaps corporations, universities, the natural environment, the presidency, and nation-states fall into this category, along with many others. So while the strategy is unusual, to say the least, it doesn't fail on the grounds that it posits objects of obligation that are not persons.

However, (f) takes future generations to be abstract entities, and it *is* counterintuitive to think we can have duties to abstracta, or that abstract entities have rights. If some of them do have moral standing, that needs further defense prior to accepting (f) as a viable strategy for addressing the paradoxes. Numbers, properties, and propositions are all abstract entities, according to some views, and such necessarily non-spatiotemporal entities are not in the same category as those things to which we can have moral obligations.

There is a second complaint about (f). When a given future generation becomes a present generation, this would mark a transition where an abstract entity becomes a spatiotemporal one, and this seems impossible if there is to be real continuity between a fu-

ture generation and its becoming present. But such continuity is necessary if it is to be the case that when the future arrives, we will have *lived up to* our obligations to *those* particular future generations. Otherwise we will have lived up to obligations to something else, not those particular future people. Given this and the previous objection, strategy (f) is an implausible means of defending the existence of future generations.

There may be other strategies in addition to (a)-(f), but I take it that I have exhausted the available options—I take it that all views on the ontology of future generations fall into one or another of the categories above. Since all are exposed to decisive difficulties, what remains is the thesis that seemed plausible at the outset: Future generations do not exist.

Third option: Deny (III) and/or (III)'

This strategy rejects the intuitively plausible principle that a thing has to exist in order for anyone to have any obligations to it. But the principles captured by (III) and (III)' are principles that don't just seem reasonable—they seem *very* plausible, and as such would need more plausible principles to take their place if one is to reject them.

So what might be put in place of (III) and (III)'? Perhaps the following:

(III)* In order to have a duty to *X*, it must be that either *X* presently exists or that *X will* exist.

(III)'* In order to *X* to have rights, it must be that either *X* presently exists or that *X will* exist.

To be clear, what follows from this is that if it is true (now) that *X* will exist, then presently existing people can have obligations to *X*.

Let the focus here be on (III) and (III)*, since similar considerations apply to (III)' and (III)'*. What case might be made for (III)*? Insisting on its truth begs the question, and the principle is not *a priori* intuitive. So what might the line of thought in favor of (III)* be? One argument might appeal to a relatively well-agreed-upon principle in metaethics, for both (III) and (III)* are quite similar to various versions of the person-affecting principle:

(PAP1) For an action to be morally significant, it must affect persons who actually exist.[10]

(PAP2) For an action to be morally significant, it must affect persons who actually exist or who will exist.[11]

(PAP3) For an action to be morally significant, it must affect persons who actually exist or who are very likely to exist.

10] See Baier 1990.

11] See Carter 2001.

One might also consider non-anthropocentric versions of (PAP1)-(PAP3), formulated not in terms of persons, but in terms of things. For instance, it also seems intuitive that in order for an action to be morally significant, it must affect *something* that has moral standing. One might add two variations on the person-affecting principle put in terms of moral standing.

(PAP4) For an action to be morally significant, it must affect things that have moral standing.

(PAP5) For an action to be morally significant, it must affect things that have or will have moral standing.[12]

The idea is that one might find (PAP2), (PAP3), and/or (PAP5) *more* plausible or *more* intuitive than (III), and since those versions of the person-affecting principle are in conflict with (III), (III) must give way. (Principles PAP(1) and PAP(4) are consistent with (III)—accepting them doesn't assist in escaping the paradox.) What must be put in (III)'s place, one might think, is a principle that keeps the spirit of (III), for instance by ruling out our having duties to nonexistent things like unicorns, but is not in conflict with (PAP2), (PAP3), and/or (PAP5).

The difficulty with this line of thought is this. One can grant either (PAP2), (PAP3), or (PAP5) and still accept (III) after all, given that there can be some obligations that are not directed to particular individuals. It is consistent to hold that actions must affect people who do exist or will exist in order for such actions to be morally significant, while at the same time taking the view that something must exist in order to have duties to it. §3 below will address the details of this distinction more directly.

There could be other arguments in favor of rejecting (III) and/or (III)', to be sure. But whatever such arguments might be, they face the following challenges. They must be defended ultimately by premises with greater intuitive support than (III) and (III)'. They must also be defended in a non-question-begging way—i.e., they cannot unwarrantedly assert that one can have moral obligations to nonactualized future people. Finally, such suggested principles must be consistent with both the nonexistence of distant future generations and with our having moral obligations to such future generations.[13]

III. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL OBSERVATIONS

All reasonable candidates for views of the ontology of future generations fail to support denying the second claim in each paradox. Denying the third claim in each paradox

12] There is a danger that these last formulations are not illuminating, depending on how one analyzes the concept of moral standing. For if a partial analysis is that a thing has moral standing if it can be harmed now, or could be harmed in the future, one has reached principles much like those listed above.

13] Compare my position with that of Johnson 2003. Johnson would accept (II), that future generations do not exist, as well as (I), that we have obligations to future generations. He reformulates (III) by way of reformulating the person-affecting principle, thus trying to meet the challenge laid out here.

has its difficulties as well, for it is not clear how one might defend the alternatives to (III) and (III)' that allow for moral obligations to future individuals that are presently nonexistent. So the denial of the first claim in each paradox appears to follow: We have no duties to future generations, and future generations have no rights.

Incredulous readers should take comfort in the following final observations. First, giving up on duties to particular individuals in the future, as well as denying them rights, does not entail that we have no moral obligations concerning future states of affairs. For it is possible to have no moral obligations to future generations or to future people per se, while also having obligations to do things that will have various positive effects in the future. In other words, one might draw a distinction between two types of moral obligations. There are obligations *to individuals*, and there are obligations *to do* various actions not directed at any particular individuals or groups of them. One might call them *directed* and *non-directed* moral obligations. Obligations of the first sort include obligations to oneself and to other presently existing beings. These include my obligation not to commit suicide, my obligation to behave rationally, my obligation to help the disaster victims as I am capable, and also my obligations to my daughter to alleviate any unnecessary pain she might have. Obligations of the second sort include my obligations not to waste water, fossil fuels, and energy generally, along with my obligation not to pollute the environment.[14]

Second, the three primary traditions in ethical theory allow for our being obligated to do various actions that would be much the same as those recommended by views embracing obligations to particular nonexistent future generations. Aretaic views are friendly to the notion that there are some non-directed moral obligations, for instance, for virtues such as moderation and frugality need not be defined in terms of relations to individuals. Consequentialist theories might still have us obligated to prevent waste of natural resources, etc. in order to avoid harms to presently existing individuals, while leaving aside harms to nonexistent entities such as future generations. Such theories might also have us obligated to avoid causing harms generally, as is the spirit of such theories, but not with any particular future people or future generations in mind. E.g., even if there are no presently existing future people, 'Not acting to reverse the trend of human-caused global warming will cause harms in the distant future' is still true. Adherents of deontological views might take the same approach, holding that we can be obligated to do various things that will impact the future, but with such duties being duties to presently existing individuals instead of future generations or future people.

Such observations should be comforting, and also should serve to deflect a particular sort of objection that adherents of obligations to future generations might raise. For the basic complaint against rejecting obligations to future generations, as was observed earlier, is that the move seems to give up on the possibility of having moral obligations involving the future, and surely we *do* have such obligations. Yet as I suggested here at the end, such obligations can be had without our having obligations to particular nonexis-

14] Pletcher (1981) seems to defend a similar distinction.

tent future generations, composed of particular nonexistent future people. That sort of directed obligation to future generations, as I have argued, is nonexistent.

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