

Caring for Future Generations

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Present generations must learn to care and to be concerned about not only themselves, and their ancestors, but also unborn generations yet to come. How did this unique obligation of present generations to future generations come about, and how might this obligation become more widely recognized, and fulfilled?

For tens of thousands of years, humans lived in environments of almost no novelty. For them, everything was as it had always been before. Scarcely anything was novel. For eons, humans lived in societies where roughly 80% of the future was exactly the same as the past, 15% of the future operated on some cyclical basis, and at best only 5% of the future was new and unprecedented.

We are biologically and psychologically conditioned to live in such a predictable, precedent-governed world, I believe. Each of us is most comfortable in believing that our future and that of our children and grandchildren and beyond will be basically like our present, just a little better, we hope, but not significantly different. "A sigh is just a sigh," we sing. "The fundamental things persist as time goes by."

Well, that is not the case. We now live in a world of perpetual change and novelty--where that which is unprecedented overwhelms whatever continuity from the past might linger on.

In the past, the best we could expect to do for our children was to pass on to them the wisdom of our ancestors just as we had received it from our parents and they from their parents before them.

Then, a few hundred years ago, and especially within the last fifty years, a new perspective has come to dominate the world--the idea of progress, development, and economic growth. The belief propelling "progress" was that, by engaging in a certain kind of economic development, and all the social change that went with it, we could pass on to our descendants something even better than that which our ancestors gave us--we could give our descendants the key to endless economic growth and ever-increasing wealth and opportunities.

That belief in "progress" is still firmly in the driver's seat everywhere in the world. All governments are still racing towards this future. But more and more voices and forces worldwide also are questioning the idea and institutions of "development"--wondering whether we are not, in fact, giving our children a worse world compared to the one we inherited from our ancestors--more crowded, more polluted, more indebted, more unstable, more dangerous, more unfair, more artificial--and for which the wisdom of our ancestors is less and less relevant, even though we teach and preach the old ways with more vigor and insistence than ever.

Whatever the truth of the matter here, we are for the first time faced with a new ethical question for which neither the wisdom of our ancestors nor the advocates of continual progress have a satisfying answer. And that ethical question is: "What are the obligations of present generations towards future generations?"

By "future generations" we do not mean our own children and grandchildren. That is far too easy. Of course we care about them! (Or do we? Look at the abused and neglected children all around us now!)

By "future generations" we mean all future life, everywhere, and forever--from here to eternity. And not just human life, but all future life of all kinds.

How can we in the present accurately identify the needs of future generations? Can we be sure that by satisfying ourselves we are also satisfying the needs of future generations, or at least not preventing them from satisfying their needs for themselves?

And, if we can somehow identify the needs of future generations, how can we then act ethically and responsibly in the present to enable future generations to satisfy their needs?

These are new ethical problems about which all previous philosophical, ethical, and spiritual traditions are essentially silent. Neither Jesus, nor the Buddha, nor Confucius, nor Mohammed, nor Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, nor St. Augustine, nor even St. Thomas Aquinas, or any of the others has written clearly and distinctly about your obligation towards future generations, although you might find useful hints and phrases in their sayings and actions.

Can we rise above our selfish focus on ourselves and our narrow present strip of time, and find a way to include the needs of future generations in our present-day decision making? It is a unique challenge, and ours is a unique responsibility.

There have been several important actions taken recently. Unesco, a unit within the United Nations, passed a "Declaration of the responsibilities of present generations towards future generations" which is certainly a major step in the right direction. And the Supreme Court of the Philippines has held that certain people speaking on behalf of future generations have legal standing in court.

But we need much more than that. We need your commitment.

Future generations--they are our conscience. We must think and act for them, as well as for our own interests.