

Arguments against obligations to future generations – and objections

Argument from temporal location

- 1 Future people do not yet exist.
- 2 We have no obligations to anything that doesn't yet exist
- 3 We have no obligations to future people.

But: Is premise 2 correct? Don't we often accept that we have obligations towards beings that do not (yet) exist? Why is teenage pregnancy often viewed as a bad thing? Because its bad for the teenagers certainly, but perhaps because its not the best thing for the potential child. We implicitly accept that we have an obligation toward somebody who does not (and might never) exist.

Argument from ignorance

- 1 We can have obligations to beings only if we can know what those beings are like and what they need or desire.
- 2 We can't know what future people will be like or what they will need or desire.
- 3 We have no obligations to future people.

But: Is premise 2 correct? Whilst we may not know what exactly it will be that future people will need or desire, it is fairly safe to assume that they will not want a polluted environment.

An argument in favour of obligations towards future generations:

- 1 We have obligations to all currently living people.
- 2 Future people are in no morally relevant respect different from currently living people.
- 3 We have obligations to all future people.

Perhaps future people can be viewed in the same way as people who live in distant places (those who are spatially distant from us). They are temporally distant from us. Our obligations to them are definitely real. (Although perhaps not as strong as the obligations we have towards our friends and family?)

Which moral theories should we apply to the treatment of future generations?

The classic theories e.g. utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue are all possible options. Try to think of how each may be applied.

One potentially promising option is to use a modified version of Rawls' "veil of ignorance" thought experiment. Perhaps if we are also unaware of the generation to which we will belong we will devise policies that are just in their treatment of all generations. Would it seem just, for example, to allow one generation to use all the fossil fuels?