Big Questions in Philosophy:

What, if anything, do we owe to future generations?

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The **content** and **scope** of morality

- Moral philosophers try to provide plausible accounts of *what we owe to each other*.

- These accounts try to identify the **content** and the **scope** of our moral duties.

- The **content** of our moral duties concerns how we ought to behave towards others.

- The **scope** of our moral duties concerns the **type of beings to whom our moral duties apply**.
The **content** and **scope** of morality

- A being’s ‘moral status’ determines whether we have moral duties towards it, and how strong those duties are.

- A being’s moral status is typically thought to be determined by certain facts about that being, and/or by certain facts about our relationship to that being.

*Irish Schoolbook “Christ’s Life In Us” (1970)*
What is the ‘moral status’ of future generations?

• Most of the time, questions of morality arise in the context of what we owe to our contemporaries, i.e. people who are alive at the same time as us.

• What about those who are no longer living?

• What about those who have yet to be born?
Past and Future People

• We sometimes behave in ways that suggest that we do have moral obligations to the dead. For example:
  
  • We think we should keep our promises to the dead.
  
  • We think we can honour or dishonour the dead.
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• We sometimes behave in ways that suggest that we do have moral obligations to those yet to be born. For example:

  • When considering whether and when to have children, our decisions are informed to some extent by considerations about the quality of life that the potential child is likely to enjoy.

  • We think we should sometimes make sacrifices in the present, to ensure that future generations can enjoy a decent standard of living.
So what’s the problem?

• The problem is that our intuitions with regard to past and future people are in tension with three plausible philosophical ideas:

  • 1. The person-affecting principle.
  • 2. The counterfactual account of harm.
  • 3. The genetic identity view of personal identity.
(1) The Person-Affecting Principle

- This principle says that an act can only be bad if it is bad for someone.

- In order to act wrongly, we must be able to point to a person who has been (or will be) harmed by our action (or inaction).
(1) The Person-Affecting Principle

- This creates some problems for our obligations to dead people: since we can no longer make their lives go better or worse, the person-affecting principle says that we cannot treat them badly.

- However: we may still have reasons to perform certain duties such as keeping our promises to the dead, or honouring the dead provided that we can link these duties to other people who exist (or will exist in the future).
• What about future people?

• The decisions we take in the present will prevent some people from being born in the future.

• Since these people will never exist, the person-affecting principle says that we cannot wrong them by failing to bring about their existence.

• So far so good...
(1) The Person-Affecting Principle

• What about those future people we do create?

• While the person-affecting principle suggests that nobody has a right to be brought into existence, it does not entail that we are entitled to create people whose lives are so miserable that they are not worth living.

• If we can choose between not creating a person, and creating a person whose life is not worth living, we should choose not to create that person.
(1) The Person-Affecting Principle

- What about future people whose lives are bad, but not so bad that they’re not worth living?

- Consider the following case:
Suppose that in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, humans choose a series of environmental policies designed to maximize our own standards of living.

As a result of these policies, sea-levels begin to rise. Over a period of several generations, rising sea-levels force people to migrate away from coastal regions and live in crowded, polluted cities.

Enola is a young girl who is born into one of these cities. She suffers illness because of environmental pollution caused by her ancestors, and her life is hard, but still worth living.

Would she have a moral complaint against her ancestors? Have they failed in their duties toward her?

We might think the answer to this question depends on whether Enola been harmed by their actions.
(2) The counterfactual account of harm

• Most people have the strong intuition that Enola has been wronged, but this intuition clashes with another intuitive philosophical idea: the counterfactual account of harm.

• The counterfactual account of harm says that you can only harm a person if your actions (or inactions) leave them worse off than they otherwise would have been if you had acted differently.
(2) The counterfactual account of harm

• Why is this a problem?

• If we hadn’t chosen the selfish environmental policies, Enola would have been better off, so we have harmed her, haven’t we?

• Unfortunately, Enola can’t make this claim without abandoning a third philosophical idea that we find powerfully intuitive...
(3) The genetic identity view of personal identity

• According to the genetic identity view, a person’s identity is determined (in part) by their genes.

• In other words, what makes you you is the fact that a particular sperm fertilized a particular egg.

• If you had had a different parent, or if your parents had conceived at a different point in time (with a different sperm and/or egg), then you would never have existed.
Enola’s complaint

• What does this mean for Enola’s complaint?

• The **counterfactual account of harm** says that in order for a person to be harmed by us, they must be worse off than they would have been if we had acted differently.

• But that **isn’t true** for Enola. If her ancestors had acted differently, she wouldn’t have been better off – **she wouldn’t have existed at all.**
The Non-Identity Problem

• Our actions in the present determine not just what kinds of lives future people have, but whether those future people exist at all.

• If we accept the person-affecting principle, the counterfactual account of harm, and the genetic identity view of personal identity, then it looks like we haven’t wronged people like Enola.

• But this seems highly counterintuitive.
Responding to The Non-Identity Problem

• There are roughly three types of responses that philosophers can give to the non-identity problem:

• (1) Bite the bullet: Maybe we really don’t wrong future generations however we behave, provided that their lives are worth living.

• (2) Reject one or more of (a) the person-affecting principle, (b) the counterfactual account of harm, or (c) the genetic identity view of personal identity.

• (3) Find some other way to ground our duties toward future generations (e.g. by focusing on our obligations towards younger generations who ‘overlap’ with our own).
Responding to The Non-Identity Problem

• Each person has an interest in being able to choose to have an ‘optimal child’ (i.e. a child whose life has a high chance of going well)

• Part of what it means to be an ‘optimal child’ is to have the ability to choose to have optimal children.

• Suppose that all of the adults alive in 2019 belong to Generation A and all of the children belong to Generation B. Suppose that members of Generation A behave in ways that will significantly reduce the quality of life of children (like Enola) born into Generation Z, several hundred years from now.
Responding to The Non-Identity Problem

• If members of **Generation Z** will not be ‘optimal children’, then members of **Generation Y** will not be ‘optimal children’ (because they never had the chance to create optimal children themselves).

• We can apply the same logic working backwards until we arrive at **Generations A and B**.

• This suggests that Generation A’s behaviour not only makes things worse for Generation Z, but Generation B as well.

• Since Generation B are currently living, the problems raised by the person-affecting principle, counterfactual account of harm, and genetic identity view, do not arise.
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• However, there remains an explanatory gap – we still have the intuition that we wrong members of future generations by acting recklessly in the present.

• Maybe we have additional obligations to current generations that just so happen to protect future generations as well, but aren’t we still missing part of the story?

• Philosophers continue to disagree about whether all these different intuitions can be made to fit with one another, and about which intuitions should be abandoned if we can’t make them all fit.
Further Reading

• **On the non-identity problem:**

• **On the counterfactual account of harm:**

• **On the person-affecting principle:**

• **Really weird stuff:**