SHOULD WE SEEK A BETTER FUTURE?

Ernest Partridge
University of California, Riverside

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Abstract

The radical contingencies attending human reproduction and the resulting genotypes of future persons, indicate that attempts to improve the living conditions of future generations results in generations populated by different individuals that would otherwise have been born. This remarkable consequence puts in doubt the widespread belief that the present generation has responsibilities to its remote successors. (Following Gregory Kavka, I will call this "The Future Persons Paradox.") I contend, first, that while the radical genetic contingency and epistemological indeterminacy of future persons absolves us of obligations to act "in behalf of" them as individuals, this moral absolution does not entail a permission to disregard entirely the remote consequences of our policies. Since relevant moral principles bind us to persons in general, not to particular individuals, we remain obligated to improve the life prospects of whatever individuals eventually come into being. Second, I suggest that by applying an analogous argument within the lives of persons rather than to the long history of civilization, we arrive at the counter-intuitive result of negating long-term obligations to contemporary persons. Conversely, the condition of continuity which affords moral legitimacy to personal obligations among contemporaries likewise entails moral responsibility for the life conditions of distant generations.

A brief and early version of this paper was presented at the 1982 Meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in March, 1982. It has undergone refinement in several subsequent presentations. I am grateful to J. Michael Russell for his useful comments at the APA meeting and to Christopher Morris, Thomas Schwartz, and the late Gregory Kavka, all of whom responded helpfully to the manuscript as it has progressed. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Kavka, whose untimely death at the height of his philosophical powers and productivity is an inconsolable loss to his profession and his friends.

I

Should we seek a better future? Few of us would deny that we should seek a better future, for ourselves, for our friends and contemporaries, and for our children and grandchildren. Nor shall I dispute this affirmation. But do we have a moral obligation to attempt to improve the life conditions of those who will live in the distant future? That claim also enjoys widespread acceptance -- in political rhetoric, if not in practice. But if we look closely at this question, a curious and troubling paradox emerges. Attempts to change conditions in the remote future have the result of causing different persons to live in that future -- persons whose lives are thus not made better than they otherwise would have been, even by successful efforts now to improve life conditions at that remotely future time. This consideration has led some observers to question whether we have any obligations whatever to our distant descendants. Though "The Future Persons Paradox" has been considered by several philosophers, I will focus my attention on what is perhaps the most rigorous and unyielding statement of this paradox -- that of the political scientist, Thomas Schwartz.[1] A successful critique of his essay might, by implication, ease the qualms of those who are troubled by the paradox, though less inclined to accept Schwartz's consequent radical denial of obligation to the remote future.

Unquestionably, we of this generation are in a position to affect profoundly the living conditions in the remote future. On the agenda of decisions before us are such matters as nuclear technology and the disposal of nuclear wastes, the destruction of wild areas and the extinctions of wild species, the permanent alteration of the atmosphere and the oceans, the depletion of nonrenewable resources, and the continuation of unregulated population growth. Each and all of these issues, and our abilities and inclinations to manage them, have grave and portentous implications for generations far into the remote future.

Are we not, therefore, morally obligated to act with care and concern for the welfare of those who will live in the remote future? Thomas Schwartz, for one, believes we are not. He writes: "We've no obligation extending indefinitely or even terribly far into the future to provide any widespread, continuing benefits to our descendants."[2] Schwartz offers a careful, compelling and thus disquieting formal argument in support of this claim -- an argument which appears to be valid. I shall assume that it is valid. Schwartz fails to notice, however, that his formal conclusion is not equivalent to the contention of his paper. It is the step from his formal conclusion to his "general contention" that I will resist. I will then conclude that our moral responsibilities to the distant future emerge from this challenge essentially unmodified.

Schwartz's formal argument proceeds from four premises through five formal steps to a conclusion. Since I will concede the validity of this argument, a full presentation thereof will not be necessary. Suffice to say that three of the premises together explicate the concepts "obligation," "harm," and "benefit." This explication yields, in effect, what Derek Parfit, Jan Narveson, and others have called the "person affecting principle"; namely, "We should do what harms people least and benefits them the most.[3] Essential to this principle is the assumption that moral obligation applies only to acts which alter, for better or worse, the life conditions of individuals. (Of course, this condition is held to be necessary but not sufficient for moral significance.) Schwartz puts it this way: "I don't see how we can be morally required to adopt [policy] P unless we owe it to someone to adopt P -- unless our not adopting P would, in some broad sense, wrong someone."[4] This apparently secure assumption will later be the focus of my criticism.

Schwartz's remaining premise holds that "were P not adopted, our distant descendants significantly affected by P's non-adoption would be people who would not have existed had P been

adopted."[5] While the premise may seem, at first glance, to be less obviously true than the "person affecting principle," upon reflection it seems quite undeniable. Schwartz's defense of the premise is persuasive, and if anything understates the case.

In describing what he calls "the case of the disappearing beneficiaries," Schwartz correctly points out that if any attempt is made to alter the conditions of distant future life, that same attempt will necessarily change the roster of individuals who exist in the distant future. It is not at all difficult to see that this is the case. Under even slightly differing conditions of life, different people meet, marry, mate, reproduce. The paths of the alternative futures diverge at exponentially increasing rates, and within a very few generations (Schwartz says six), an entire population of "merely possible persons" is replaced by another "eventually actual" population. Matters of the most trivial sort pull these contingencies ever further apart. The following scene is brought to mind:

Father: "Will you look at this! It says the President intends to go all-out for nuclear power."

Mother: "Never mind, dear, just come to bed."

The couple, let us assume, were not sufficiently distracted by the news to (ahem) forego an earlier inclination, and as a result a child was conceived a few hours later. But this was almost certainly a different child than would have been conceived had Father not read the news, or had he stumbled, coughed, answered the phone, etc.[6] For at each second, father's genetic deck of 200,000,000 gametes was being re-shuffled. Multiply this contingency by over one billion sexually active males, and the contingencies that attend eventual birth of 120 million human beings each year, and I trust that the genetic case for "disappearing beneficiaries" is more than adequately made. But there is more. Even if (per impossible) there were more than a few (if any) genetically identical individuals in the alternative futures, their admittedly different life conditions would make these potential individuals as different as identical twins reared apart.[7]

If anything, Schwartz has grossly understated the contingencies of future populations. For given the constant reshuffling of a billion genetic decks and the contingencies of meeting and mating, it follows that a "new cast" of future individuals enters and exits the stage of "possibility" in less than a nano-second. Conversely, the very point of even speculating about "future particular persons" vanishes into insignificance. Like it or not, we are reduced to dealing with indeterminate "right-bearers" and/or "utility receivers" (according to one's preferred moral theory). With "determinacy" crushed to a powder of an infinitude of alternative possible futures, we are left only to choose among a menu of rights and/or welfare opportunities for the possible persons who (by blind luck and no possible provision on our part) win the genetic lottery and enter the eventually actual future.

Consider all this from the point of view of the present individual -- i.e., ourselves. At every moment of our lives, we are "reshuffling" our own genetic decks and those of everyone we physically affect, either directly or indirectly. Thus, at every moment in our lives, each of us is obliterating several futures, and every day of our lives we are responsible for the passing of countless merely potential future individuals in and out of eventual existence. Yet we do not worry ourselves about it (unless, like Jean Paul Sartre, we wish to make a special point of doing so). Neither should we worry about it, precisely because this contingency is radically forced and indeterminate. Being beyond the reach of rational reflection and control, it is outside the bounds of moral responsibility.

And yet, many choices regarding the future seem to be matters of moral significance -- matters such as environmental and energy policy, noted in the opening of this paper. These issues appear to be morally significant, not because we can affect the lives of identifiable future persons,

but because we can affect the quality of life that will enjoyed, or endured, by future persons -- whomever, among the infinite roster of "possibles" they may, in fact, turn out to be.

And so, like it or not, Schwartz's central premise appears to be irrefutable: Policies intended to change conditions in the remote future will (even if generally unsuccessful) result, in a very few generations, in populations of different individuals.

Grant these premises, and we arrive at Schwartz's conclusion:

> C_1 "We have no obligation to any of our distant descendants to adopt P."[8]

I suggest a slight rephrasing which would not, I am sure, alter Schwartz's intent and which might remove a significant ambiguity:

> C_2 We have no obligation to any individuals who will be our distant descendants to adopt P.

Why not? Because, of course, nothing that we do will in any way alter the conditions of their lives (i.e., the lives of those eventually particular individuals). So long as future persons are, in general, even slightly better off alive than dead, such persons born in an overcrowded, resource-depleted, cancer-ridden world would have no cause to complain of us, not even if we now have it within our power to avoid these conditions and create an abundant, secure, clean, and just civilization for the future.[9] For if we did bring about the better future, the otherwise "unfortunates" would not exist to enjoy the "improved" conditions -- others would. The future that results from our negligence is the only future available for them, thus we owe nothing to them.[10]

The conclusion seems wildly counter-intuitive. Yet we are hard-pressed to avoid it. The argument persuades Schwartz to embrace his conclusion (C_1). It persuades Parfit to reject the "person-affecting principle" which, in effect, serves as a premise to the argument. For my part, I find Schwartz's argument to be valid. The conclusion C_1 follows from Schwartz's premises. Moreover, the "disappearing beneficiaries premise" is correct. Schwartz's error, I will contend, is his careless assumption that having proven C_2; i.e.:

> C_2 We have no obligation to any individuals who are our distant descendants to adopt P.

he has also proven the claim that opened our account of his position; namely:

> C_3 "We have no obligation extending indefinitely or even terribly far into the future to provide any widespread, continuing benefits to our descendants."[11]

or the bolder claim, implicit therein and in his paper that:

> C_4 We have no moral obligations to provide optimum living conditions for persons who will live in the remote future.

My response will be in two parts. First, while I will concede that the radical contingency of the genetic make-up of future persons absolves us of all obligation to act "in behalf of" any remotely future *individuals*, I will argue that this moral absolution does not entail a moral permission to disregard entirely the remote consequences of our policies. On the contrary, we remain as obligated

as ever to enhance the welfare and life prospects of future persons. Second I will suggest that Schwartz's argument, applied within the lives of persons rather than to the long history of civilization, negates equally well long-term obligations to contemporary persons. Furthermore, and conversely, the conditions of continuity which afford moral legitimacy to personal obligations among contemporaries likewise entail moral responsibility for the life conditions of distant generations.

II

It may be helpful to view "the future persons paradox" from a different time perspective. That paradox seems to imply that we have no obligations to our remote descendants. But let us examine the situation from the perspective of the descendants and ask ourselves, "What were the moral requirements, if any, of our ancestors?"

In 1787 the Constitution of the United States was approved and signed in convention. This document was drawn and enacted, in the words of its Preamble, in behalf of "ourselves and our posterity." While the first ten amendments to that constitution (ratified soon thereafter) guaranteed rights and liberties to most citizens, the framers of the constitution failed to utilize the opportunity of that convention to abolish slavery.

By Schwartz's account, we should not be grateful that the constitution was ratified and that we thus enjoy political liberty, for we were not "made better off" by that event. For had it not been ratified, we would not exist today. (Nor would we exist if George Washington had sneezed or John Hancock had spilled the inkwell.) Conversely, neither should we feel regret that slavery was not abolished at that time, for no individuals born subsequently were harmed, since they would otherwise not have existed (nor, for that matter, would we). But even if we grant that our existence follows both from the ratification of the Bill of Rights and from the failure to abolish slavery, are we then to conclude that the founding fathers are to be, respectively, neither praised or blamed for the ultimate effects of their acts upon posterity? The suggestion seems bizarre. Our moral intuitions would, I think, direct us to conclude that both praise and blame might, respectively, be directed to the conveners. Let's see how this might be so.

If we are to pass moral judgment upon the founding fathers, our judgment must follow the basic conditions of moral evaluation. This means that we must "take the moral point of view," which entails, in part, that we must (a) utilize principles that are general,[12] and (b) regard ourselves as spectators, rather than directly interested individuals. These requirements reflect the fact that notwithstanding their significant differences, most moral philosophers agree that moral principles apply to individuals by description and not denotatively; that is, due to shared general qualities and relations rather than qualities that distinguish persons as individuals.[13] In other words, moral principles are no respecters of "denotatively" particular individuals. Rather, such principles apply generally to all persons who may fall under conditions abstractly described by the principles. The task of moral judgment and evaluation is to apply principles to particular cases.[14]

While it is quite true that people in the remote future are indeterminate and indiscriminable as individuals, this fact hardly compromises the moral significance of our dealings with them. Quite the contrary, the metaethical rule of impartiality ("generality"), all too violable in our dealings with contemporaries, becomes inviolable when we assess the effects of our acts and policies upon the remote future. For, while in the former case we should disregard characteristics which distinguish particular individuals from each other, in the latter case we must do so.

From the time perspective of the founding fathers, we, as individuals, had no privilege of place among the infinite number of possible persons who might have lived (at our time) in their future. From the moral point of view, denotatively particular persons have no preference. Our forbearers could not foresee us, and even if they could have, they shouldn't have. Moral rules apply to persons only if these persons have general qualities, or relations, to which these rules have application. That we eventually came to exist is an accident -- an accident that was indeterminate and indeterminable from the point of view of the founding fathers.[15]

It follows from all this that if we are to pass moral judgment upon the members of the constitutional convention, we must do so from the moral point of view -- from the point of view of disinterested spectators,[16] not particularly affected individual agents. And if we take the moral point of view, it follows that we give ourselves no place of preference among the virtually infinite other "possible persons." That being so, the founding fathers, like ourselves, were permitted, even required, to choose that which appeared to their best judgment to provide for the optimum future. Now that choice has the strange result that the very fact of making it has changed the beneficiaries thereof. (Not only that choice, but an indefinitely large number of additional events at the time and subsequently, have changed the beneficiaries.) But since the eventual beneficiaries amount to virtually $1/\infty$ of possible beneficiaries, the question of "who (individually) gets the payoff" is a question of vanishing insignificance. Instead we are left (as were the founding fathers) with the choice between better or worse conditions in the future that will fall upon an infinitesimal fraction of the vast array of "possibles" when, with the inexorable advance of time and generations, the flux of possibility is frozen into actuality.

Thus, if, in judging our ancestors, we take the moral point of view, as we should and must if our judgments are to be moral ones, we must (a) ignore our particularity and individuality in this judgment, (b) regard our actuality as a fortunate and totally unforeseeable and unmanageable accident (as the eventual identity of our successors two hundred years hence is totally beyond our knowledge), and (c) acknowledge that our predecessors were faced with a choice of alternate futures -- a forced choice, since one or another future would come about, even if they had "done nothing" -- a choice of predictably and discriminably better or worse conditions of life. And yet those who, like Schwartz, take the Paradox seriously would have us believe that given the choice, say, between a population of happy, healthy, secure, fulfilled persons, and another population of miserable individuals whose life, on the balance, is barely worth living, we have no obligation whatever to prefer one to the other.

This argument indicates, I hope, that the choice between discriminably alternative futures does have moral significance. It has this significance even though, due to radical circumstances of time, we can not choose "person-affecting" conditions of life for individuals. We can, however, choose conditions of life, in general. Given no opportunity to improve the lives of remotely distant individuals by affecting their lives, we nonetheless manifestly have the opportunity to choose lives of variable quality. It is, in fact, the only choice we have and it is a forced choice. Given a forced choice between indeterminate individual A who is happy and fulfilled and a different indeterminate individual B who barely prefers life to nonexistence -- given this choice, opting for life A may, I submit, directly involve a primary moral premise.[17] I am not prepared to defend this choice, but I suggest that a demand to do so may be as "reasonable" as a demand to prove that there are other minds, that there is an external world, or that happiness is prima facie preferable to misery. We may, that is to say, have reached moral bedrock here.[18]

We arrive, then, at this moral judgment of our founding fathers at the constitutional convention. If they were, as they stated, acting in behalf of their "posterity," we can meaningfully judge that their proposal to amend a Bill of Rights was morally commendable and their decision not to abolish slavery was blameworthy. This was so, even though, had either decision been different,

we would not have existed. Returning to the original time perspective: Now we might imagine future persons saying "If, at the close of the 20th century, they had managed to curb their population growth, other people would have been alive now instead of us and they would have been much healthier and happier. It would have been a better world to live in." If their judgment is properly moral (i.e., taken from a moral point of view), they will correctly observe, "What a pity! Our ancestors did a terrible thing." But of course if we do what is "best" for their generation, these particular moral observers will not exist and, parenthetically, have no cause to regret their not coming into actual existence.

III

Schwartz's argument against the obligation to our remote successors ignores, presumably for the sake of simplicity, the conditions of life of intervening generations. I suggest that if we introduce this consideration, we do not merely complicate his argument, we might even undermine it. This contention might be defended by an analogy which, though it may at first seem far- etched, may at length be instructive. It is an analogy between the history of civilization (e.g. between present and remote generations) and the life of an individual.

The Case of the Profligate Parent: Consider the case of James, a young single parent of a two-month old boy, Richard. James receives a small inheritance which he might place in a trust fund to support Richard's education. However, he has other ideas. Instead of investing the money, he buys a yacht and takes year-long trip around the world. Richard, in the meantime, is placed in a foster home and eventually adopted by a poor family. As a consequence, Richard is unable to attend college and, in fact, is obliged to leave high school to support himself and his adoptive family. Had James not purchased his yacht and had he maintained custody of his son, Richard would have attended medical school and would have enjoyed a prosperous and fulfilling life as a doctor. As it is, he will be an impoverished, unskilled laborer for the remainder of his life. Clearly our intuitions tell us that James's course of action was grossly unfair to Richard, for in it James violated his parental responsibilities.

Now let's try a Schwartzian analysis of the case (admittedly superficial). If James had fulfilled his obligation to Richard, them the course of Richard's life after the age of two months would have been radically different. Not only his education, but also the influence of his neighborhood, friends, and family would have directed his life differently. At age thirty, Richard's life prospects would have been significantly improved. As it turned out, the thirty-year-old Richard was poorly treated and apparently had good reason to condemn James for his profligacy. (Conversely, according to ordinary "common sense" judgment, a wretchedly poor third-world child, adopted by a comfortably-placed European or North American family, should consider himself very fortunate.[19] Could Schwartz, with consistency, say as much? Read on!)

But did Richard "have good reason" to condemn James? After all, Richard the laborer became a different person than he would have been had he remained with his father and trained to be a doctor. Had James done his duty, the actual Richard would never have existed. James's selfishness was a necessary condition for the existence of Richard's individual, distinguishing personality. Conversely, had James met his responsibilities, "Dr. Richard" would have no cause for gratitude, since he would not have been "worse off" had he not enjoyed these benefits. He simply would not be, "he" would have been a different person with the same genetic code (like identical twins raised apart).

But surely, all this is far-fetched and quite unfair to Schwartz's position. For I have not considered in this account the fact that Richard was a continuing person who, in either case, would have evolved to these contrasting conditions of life. And as he thus evolved, he would have experienced, respectively, frustration and despair, or hope and fulfillment. His stages of life, in either case, would have been linked and unified by the strands of memory, habit, character, aspiration, and reflection that defined his continuing self. It is, in short, a grave error to compare these widely separated stages in his life without considering the intervening time that binds his infancy with his adulthood. Once the intervening time is brought back into the picture, and the continuity acknowledged, the strangely concocted rationalization of his father's irresponsibility collapses.

Therein, I believe, lies a telling argument against Schwartz's absolution of moral responsibility to remote generations. For continuing civilizations, like continuing individuals, are linked by strands of hope and fulfillment, or of dread and frustration. The difference is that in the case of civilizations, the conditions obtain not within a single life but within and among a collection of lives bound by the patterns of interaction and the shared traditions, values, and expectations that make the aggregate a community. Furthermore, members of continuing communities normally regard the life conditions and prospects of their contemporaries and successors, as well as their own life conditions and prospects, as matters of personal concern. (People normally care not simply for themselves, but also for other persons, things, places, institutions, ideals, etc.).[20]

If we project a time many generations hence in which people will live under circumstances much diminished from our own, then we must assume that those who live in the intervening time will, in general, experience and endure the decline of civilized life, and due to this process of decline, they will suffer despair, anxiety, frustration, and deprivation. The communal experience is not unlike the personal experience of an individual who suffers a decline in his health, fortune, or reputation. Conversely, if we and our successors envisage and successfully work toward a better future, we and our successors will live with hope, enthusiasm and a sense of personal and communal fulfillment, much like a young person with promising professional and personal prospects before him.[21]

And so, just as it was wrong to subject the infant Richard to disadvantageous circumstances and prospects, so too is it wrong to set the course of succeeding generations on the path of declining expectations, when we might instead have the option of affording them opportunities for long-term fulfillment, abundance, and satisfaction.

Civilizations through history, and perhaps persons throughout their lifetimes, are like Wittgenstein's rope. Between stages or eras, widely separated through time, there may be no linking "strands" that endure throughout, yet the continuing rope binds them together. In an individual, memories, dispositions, habits, anticipations, aspirations come and go. Yet these traits are integrated into a continuing and enduring personality.[22] In a civilization, the component lives come and go, and the shared traditions, ideals, and aspirations, held both individually and collectively, likewise arise, evolve, and perish (but often over several generations), just as the strands of a rope begin and end while the rope endures throughout. And so though we grant that the individuals who might exist in alternate remote futures will be entirely different individuals in each future, we still have reason to ask, regarding various futures, "How shall we get there from here?" -- i.e., "What is to be the intervening course of civilization and the life conditions therein." Just as we cannot ethically disregard the course of a life between two widely separated stages of that life, neither can we be morally indifferent to the time and circumstances that intervene between the era of our generation and that of a remote successor generation. Just as our responsibility to a "later self" is linked to the present by the continuities that identify an individual life, so too is our responsibility to remote descendants linked by the conditions of life of intervening generations. We are responsible, not only

for the life conditions and prospects of those who will live in the remote future, but also for the intervening conditions that link our lives with their lives. For reasons that are remarkably comparable, both the profligate parent and the profligate generation are morally blameworthy.

NOTES

1. Thomas Schwartz, "Obligations to Posterity," in Obligations to Future Generations, ed. R. I. Sikora and Brian Barry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, l978), p. 3-13. A concurrent and apparently independent statement may be found in Robert Merrihew Adams' "Existence, Self-Interest and the Problem of Evil," *Nous* 13 (1979), pp. 53-65. Among the significant responses to Schwartz's challenge are Gregory Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals," *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* 11 (1982): 93-122, Christopher Morris, "Existential Limits to the Rectification of Past Wrongs," *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 21 (April, 1984), 175-82, and, most extensively, Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons,* Clarendon Press, Oxford (1984), especially Chapter 16, This important book integrates ideas regarding the paradox, that Parfit explored earlier in numerous influential papers.

2. Loc. cit., p. 3. It is interesting to note that while Schwartz, a political philosopher, readily embraces the implication that we have no obligations to remotely future persons, philosophers such as Parfit, Kavka, and myself, resist this conclusion. Perhaps moral philosophers have an acquired tolerance for paradox that is less commonplace in other scholarly professions.

3. Derek Parfit, "Rights, Interests, and Possible People," **Moral Problems in Medicine,** ed. Samuel Gorovitz, et. al. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, l976), p. 371. Also, Parfit, *Reasons and Persons, loc. cit,* Chs. 16 & 18, Jan Narveson, "Moral Problems of Population," in **Ethics and Population,** ed. Michael Bayles, (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., l976), p. 73. Parfit and Narveson refer to "people." Others might wish to extend the set to include "sentient beings." This extension need not affect the basic argument. Though Schwartz is obviously dealing with the concept of the "person-affecting principle" he does not identify it by that name, nor does he refer to any philosophers that do (e.g., Parfit and Narveson).

4. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-2. Italics in the original. By "P" Schwartz means "a restrictive population policy," but clearly any efficacious policy, or act, fulfills the rule.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 10.

6. For an amusing account of this "radical contingency," see Garrett Hardin, "The Semantics of Abortion," in Hardin, *Stalking the Wild Taboo*, 2nd edition (Los Altos: Kaufmann, l978), pp. 12-3.

7. While Schwartz does not, in fact, make this point about cultural contingencies, it can only serve to strengthen his argument.

8. Schwartz, *op. cit.,* p. 11.

9. If we cause people to exist in the future in such a condition that the average rational individual would have good reason to reflect, "I wish I had never been born," then, knowing this, we would be required not to so act. Why? Because for the "net minus" future person it would, in fact, have been better for him if a different hypothetical person had existed. Accordingly, there is a lower limit to the mischief that we can do -- there is, that is to say, an obligation not deliberately to cause a "net minus future." However, for future conditions above that threshold, the Future Persons Paradox remains in full force.

10. The implications of this conclusion range from the practically significant to the bizarre. Among the former is the suggestion by C. Morris that the paradox jeopardizes the claims of present persons (e.g., afro-americans and native americans) for reparations for wrongs done to their ancestors. Morris, *op. cit.* Among the latter is Schwartz' claim that those born after World War II would "have to be stunningly altruistic to regret any of Hitler's significant actions." (Thomas Schwartz, personal correspondence to Ernest Partridge, 30 March, 1982).

11. Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

12. Cf. John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 131-2.

13. The most significant "distinguishing qualities" that denotatively identify an individual person are, of course, his particular genetic code and the set of events in his life-history that make up his memory and form his habits, attitudes, and dispositions – in short, his character. These qualities, which radically determine individuality, are utterly unknowable from the perspective of the remote past.

14. Take a simple case: If I owe John $10 I should pay him, not because he is John, but because John is the individual to whom I owe $10; that is to say, not because of the innumerable qualities that make him John and distinguish him from all other persons, but because this congeries of qualities that is John is involved in the relationship of my having made a promise to him, and that promise falls under the rule "P should fulfill promises made to Q" (P and Q being variables, instantiated in this instance by me and John). In other words, the recipient of my payment is identified designatively (in terms of his role with regard to me), not denotatively (in terms of the qualities and life history that identify and distinguish him). Consider next a case of non-reciprocating duty: I should refrain from leaving broken glass on the beach, not for the "sake" of a denotatively particular beneficiary of that duty (for if I fulfill that duty, there will be no particular beneficiary), but to prevent possible harm to anyone with the general descriptive qualities of "barefoot user of that beach." Duties to the remote future resemble the latter case.

15. Not only an "accident," but an event that, from the perspective of two-hundred years ago was virtually impossible. (Sartre and others have, of course, spilled a lake of ink over such matters as this). On the other hand, from our perspective, our existence is a matter of utter Cartesian certainty.

16. Rawls would say "indiscriminate contractors with no knowledge of distinguishing individual qualities, preferences or circumstances" (my paraphrase). Notwithstanding significant differences among their moral theories, the generality condition applies alike to Hare's "universal prescribers," Rawls's "rational contractors," the utilitarians' "disinterested spectators," and Kant's "moral will."

17. Parfit has vividly described such a choice. His most interesting case is that of a woman who is told by a doctor that she will give birth to a handicapped child if she conceives within a year, but if she waits a year, she will produce a healthy child. Assuming she desires only one child, is the decision morally indifferent, since no child will be affected by her decision? (The "same child" can not be "put off 'till later." The "later child" will, of necessity, be a different child). See Parfit's "Rights, Interests, and Possible People," op. cit., "On Doing the Best for Our Children," in Ethics and Population, ed. Michael Bayles (Cambridge: Schenkman, l976), p. 100-15, "Energy Policy and the Further Future," Energy and the Future, ed. MacLean and Brown. See also his *Reasons and Persons*, *op. cit.*, Part IV.

18. The conclusion seems perilously close to suggesting that, other factors being equal, a couple is obliged to produce a child that they know will be happy. (A familiar moral puzzle). "Person affecting principles" such as Schwartz utilizes, support the intuition that, on the contrary, the couple is not blameworthy if they choose to remain childless. After all, if they do so, "no one" is deprived. There is, however, a crucial difference between the case of the reluctant couple, and the generation contemplating the life conditions of its remote descendants. In the latter case, one assumes that there will be remotely future persons in any case. Choices between alternative futures, then, involve choices between the being and non-being of possible persons, (albeit that too is involved when the alternative futures are understood to contain different numbers of possible persons). In short, we are dealing in this essay with the question of the quality of life of future persons, assuming all along that there will be future persons.

19. This is by no means a rare event. In fact, such adoptions are routinely reported in the popular press. For example, see Mary Jo McConahay, "The Baby Trade," Los Angeles TIMES Magazine, December 16, 1990.

20. See my "Why Care About the Future"" in Responsibilities to Future Generations, ed. Ernest Partridge, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981).

21. The significance of this multigenerational perspective to moral consciousness is eloquently expressed by Annette Baier:

> The crucial role we fill, as moral beings, is as members of a cross-generational community, a community of beings who look before and after, who interpret the past in the light of the present, who see the future as growing out of the past, who seem themselves as members of enduring families, nations, cultures, traditions. Perhaps we could even use Kant's language and say that it is because persons are noumenal beings that obligations to past persons and to future persons reinforce one another, that every obligation is owed by, to and toward persons as participants in a continuing process of the generation and regeneration of shared values.

From "The Rights of Past and Future Persons," in Partridge, op. cit. 1981, p. 177. See also Nicolai Hartmann's "Love of the Remote" in his **Ethics**, Vol. 2. (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1931), p 311. Abridged version in Partridge, **op. cit.**

22. Cf. Derek Parfit, "Later Selves and Moral Principles," Philosophy and Personal Relations, ed. Alan Montefiore (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, l973), pp 137-69. My account of personality suggests Parfit's "complex view of the self." Even so, I believe that I might be able to persuade an advocate of the "simple view." While he would insist that there is a "deep strand" that unites all stages of a life, he might still concede that, as one changes through stages of life, he is notably a "different person" than he was at an earlier age. That concession might suffice to make my point.