

Presentism and Future Generations: A Moral-Philosophical Perspective on Policy Obligations

Zhenyu Sheng ¹, Michael Velloza ²

¹ Harrow School, 5 High Street, Harrow on the Hill, Middlesex HA1 3HP, UK

² Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JD, UK

Abstract

This article examines several ethical theories to inform policymaking, calling for a balance between responsibilities to present and future individuals. Imagine that no obligation is exclusively owed to the living. Their recognisability, vulnerability, and ability to participate in reciprocal moral exchanges necessitate their priority in practice, such as healthcare, reducing poverty, and making society fairer. Addressing climate change, protecting the environment, and mitigating nuclear risk will have a significant impact on future generations. If policymakers fail to attend to these duties, it will put intergenerational equity and long-term human flourishing at risk. The finding highlights that reasonable policymaking must consider the pros and cons of both the present and the future, which involves alleviating immediate pain while also following precautionary principles, avoiding unnecessary economic depreciation, and promoting sustainability. This strategy reduces short-termism and ensures that everyone is treated fairly over the long term. It protects the well-being of both current and future citizens.

Keywords

ethical, policy, moral, present, and future generations.

1. Introduction

This article examines the ethical question of whether moral obligations differ between present and future persons, and how such obligations should guide policymaking. I argue that while there is no obligation we owe uniquely to living persons, the immediacy of their needs, identifiability, and capacity for reciprocal moral relationships justify prioritizing them in many contexts. Drawing on contractualism (5), I contend that living individuals carry greater moral weight because they can reasonably reject harmful actions and participate in moral dialogue, unlike future persons who remain undefined. Utilitarian perspectives (8) further support prioritizing alleviation of present suffering, as tangible needs such as healthcare, poverty, and social injustice yield immediate and measurable increases in utility. However, obligations to future persons cannot be dismissed: their well-being is profoundly shaped by present choices, particularly regarding climate change, environmental sustainability, and existential risks such as nuclear war (13; 17). Thus, policymaking requires a balance between urgent short-term responsibilities and long-term commitments to intergenerational justice. I propose that ethical frameworks—grounded in precautionary principles, fairness across time, and resistance to unjustified discounting—can guide decisions that respect both present suffering and future human flourishing.

There is no obligation that we owe to living persons that we don't owe to future persons, but we must prioritise living persons to some degree. We owe more moral obligations to living persons because they are identifiable, vulnerable, and capable of reciprocal moral relationships, justifying policies that prioritize immediate needs like healthcare and poverty reduction (1). Future persons can be significantly affected by today's actions, so we also have

obligations to protect their well-being through various actions, such as climate change actions and war risk prevention. Therefore, we must balance short-term responsibilities, which are focused on present living persons, with long-term responsibilities, which are centred on future persons (2). Policymaking should be rooted in ethical frameworks that weigh up these competing priorities to ensure that both present and future lives are respected, protected, and fairly considered in decision-making processes (3).

2. The Contractualism and the Utilitarian perspective in moral

Firstly, I argue that moral obligations to living persons are stronger due to their immediate vulnerability, identifiable needs, and ability to participate in reciprocal moral relationships. This is impossible to apply to future persons as we do not know their vulnerability and what they need yet (5). According to Contractualism, as explained by philosopher T.M. Scanlon, moral principles are those that cannot be reasonably rejected as a basis for informed, unforced agreement among free and equal individuals. This theory emphasizes mutual recognition and justification among persons who can engage in moral reasoning. Living persons are identifiable, vulnerable, and capable of participating in this moral dialogue. They can hold us accountable and reasonably reject actions that cause them harm. In contrast, however, future persons cannot currently participate in this moral contract under contractualism (6). Therefore, in this case, our obligations to living individuals carry greater moral weight, especially in urgent, reciprocal contexts like healthcare or social justice, since we are responsible for implementing policies that can impact the wellbeing and morality of future generations. So, the concept of contractualism is essentially correct since one should prioritize obligations owed to living persons due to their clearer identifiability and vulnerability as opposed to future persons.

From a Utilitarian perspective (8), the morally right action is the one that maximizes overall happiness. Living persons face immediate and measurable suffering—such as hunger, illness, or poverty—which can be directly alleviated through present action (9), because their needs are identifiable and urgent, helping them yield a clear and immediate increase in overall utility. Therefore, alleviating present suffering is prioritised, even if it specifically leads to greater future harm. While future persons matter, the uncertainty of their identities and circumstances makes it harder to calculate and maximize their utility. Thus, utilitarianism often gives stronger weight to current, tangible suffering (7). This suggests that it should be to our best interest to pursue policies that can lead to an overall increase in total utility to the society, when this present utility can outweigh the expense/cost on future generations, and that we can't not alleviate present harm because of some harm that such policies could cause in the future.

Secondly, disregarding moral obligations to future persons undermines principles of justice, sustainability, and long-term human flourishing. Future persons, though not yet alive, are still moral subjects whose well-being should shape our actions today—especially in policy areas like climate, health, and resource management. The moral weight we assign to future generations has profound implications for how we set priorities in policymaking. The more importance we place on the far future, the more we are compelled to focus on long-term global challenges that will impact not just a few, but potentially billions of lives. Suppose we view future people—those living ten, a hundred, or even a thousand years from now—as morally equal to people living today (4). In that case, the scale of impact across time dramatically increases our responsibility toward them. This change may have drastic policy ramifications, which would also lead to restructuring of the society and the social norm of morality. Currently, some beneficial policies (e.g. deforestation leading to economic empowerment for rural communities) are directly harmful to future generations' ability to

survive and flourish. So, the more emphasis we place on our obligations to these generations, the stronger the case for overhauling the current policymaking status quo.

3. Policy on Climate change and nuclear war risk

One of the most urgent concerns in this context is climate change (10). Climate change is expected to significantly alter the conditions of life on Earth by making food production more difficult(11)., increasing the frequency and intensity of storms, and creating widespread environmental instability. The long-term harms caused by climate change demand serious attention, because they affect not just current populations but countless future lives (12). This provides a strong reason to prioritize policies that mitigate long-term existential risks.

The risk of nuclear war represents an existential threat that bridges both present and future obligations. A large-scale nuclear conflict could lead to the near or total extinction of humanity (17). If this occurs, all potential future human value — culture, innovation, relationships, flourishing—would be permanently lost. Therefore, preventing such disastrous risks becomes a moral order that is not only for those alive today, but also for the countless future individuals whose lives depend on our decisions now.

However, there is an opposing view prioritizes alleviating present suffering. For instance, millions of people today suffer from preventable diseases such as malaria (15) or live under exploitative conditions (14) as in the case of left-behind children in rural China (16). These are clear, visible issues that demand immediate moral concern and action. From this viewpoint, moral obligations should focus first on those who already exist and are suffering now, because we can directly identify and assist them.

This leads back to the ethical question at hand: How should we balance our obligations to present individuals with those to future generations? Should climate change be considered the most urgent global policy issue because of its long-term effects? Or should our attention focus on strengthening healthcare systems, preventing current suffering, or resolving geopolitical threats such as war and nuclear proliferation? What do we do when alleviating present suffering directly harms future persons?

Ultimately, how we weigh moral obligations across time shapes what kinds of policies we should pursue. A future-oriented ethical framework may prioritize climate action, nuclear risk reduction, and long-term sustainability. A present-focused framework may emphasize immediate humanitarian aid, poverty reduction, and public health. Ideally, a just moral and policy framework must find a balance that addresses urgent current needs while safeguarding the conditions for future human flourishing. When we take certain actions today, we may deprive future generations of important opportunities and resources. For example, our current high consumption of fossil fuels contributes to a potential future energy crisis (18).This raises ethical concerns: are we, by prioritizing our immediate needs, placing an unfair burden on those who come after us?

4. Public policies connect with moral obligation.

Public policies must balance competing moral obligations with both current and future persons by incorporating ethical frameworks, such as intergenerational equity and precautionary principles. A practical roadmap for ethical policymaking can avoid short-termism and ensures fairness across generations. Even if we can broadly agree with future generations on the general direction of shared interests — such as sustainability or environmental stability—serious challenges remain. One key question is: How do we fairly allocate costs and benefits between the current and future generations? In other words, how

should the “price” of our actions today be set for those who will live tomorrow?

When crafting policies, decisions are often made at legal and economic levels. In economics, the discounting principle is commonly used to value future benefits and costs in terms of today’s value. A lower value is assigned to future outcomes compared to the immediate ones. However, this raises a moral dilemma: Should we apply discounting when the well-being of future people is at stake?

5. Three example studies of Moral and ethical

For example, in evaluating today’s energy consumption, should we apply discount rates to estimate its future impact? If we do, it might justify continued exploitation of resources like oil. But this assumes the future is less valuable than the present, which can be ethically problematic.

Suppose I discard broken glass beneath some plants in a forest. A hundred years later, a child, while walking through the same area, is injured by that glass. My action—carelessly leaving hazardous material in a natural environment—has directly caused harm to a future individual. If I had instead disposed of the glass properly, the injury could have been prevented. This scenario raises an important ethical question: Does the fact that the injured child did not yet exist at the time of my action make a moral difference?

This hypothetical situation is discussed by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons*, particularly in Part Four, titled “Future Generations.” Parfit uses such examples to explore the nature of our moral obligations to future people—those who do not yet exist but will inevitably be affected by our present-day actions. His argument challenges the assumption that moral responsibility is limited only to those who are currently living. In this view, the temporal gap between action and consequence does not absolve the actor of moral accountability (13). The injury remains morally relevant because it results from a foreseeable and preventable decision, regardless of the time that passes or whether the victim existed at the time the harm was caused. The most effective way to reduce the risk of injury caused by broken glass in natural areas is through the implementation of strict regulations and meaningful penalties. For example, the government may issue a ban on littering hazardous materials, such as broken glass, in forests and other public spaces. Violators could face a substantial fine of £10,000, and repeat offenders may be subject to imprisonment. Such policies create strong legal and financial deterrents, which can significantly reduce irresponsible behavior. By increasing accountability, these measures help protect both the environment and public safety from preventable harm. Parfit’s analysis underscores a central dilemma in intergenerational ethics: how should we weigh the interests and rights of future people in our current decision-making? Just as we recognize the wrongness of leaving a physical hazard that will later cause harm, we must also consider the broader implications of our actions, such as environmental degradation, unsustainable resource use, or policy decisions that limit future opportunities. These issues, though abstract in the present, may have concrete and irreversible impacts on future generations. Therefore, ethical reasoning must extend beyond immediate consequences and account for the long-term effects of our behavior on those who cannot yet speak for themselves.

Moreover, the moral obligations we owe to both present and future individuals carry significant weight in shaping public policy, yet they pull us in different directions(22). On one hand, immediate suffering, such as disease, poverty, and social injustice, demands urgent attention and intervention. These are morally pressing because the individuals affected are identifiable, vulnerable, and can benefit directly from support (1). On the other hand, ignoring the long-term consequences of our actions risks immense harm to future generations,

particularly in the face of existential threats like climate change and nuclear war (23).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that even though we owe much moral obligation to the present persons, due to their immediacy and identifiability, we should still have moral commitments for the well-being of the future population. The subsequent generations, although not yet born, are still affected by the long-term consequences of our current activities, particularly in terms of climate change, resource exploitation, and existential security risks. Therefore, effective policymaking must strike a balance between short-term pressures and long-term moral vision, avoiding both moral myopia and unattainable idealism. By embedding principles such as intergenerational justice, precautionary reasoning, and the avoidance of unjustified discounting, we can make policies that are right and inclusive of all human lives. A just society must not only alleviate present suffering but also safeguard the future human flourishing. This double obligation is what puts our moral duty and political prudence to the actual test.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my supervisor, Michael Velloza, for his guidance and encouragement throughout the Essay process, which has significantly improved my writing skills.

Reference

- [1] Powers, M., & Faden, R. R. (2006). *Social justice: The moral foundations of public health and health policy*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- [2] Gardiner, S. M. (2022). On the scope of institutions for future generations: Defending an expansive global constitutional convention that protects against squandering generations. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 36(2), 157-178.
- [3] Goodin, R. E. (1985). *Protecting the vulnerable: A re-analysis of our social responsibilities*. University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Mulgan, T. (2006). *Future people: A moderate consequentialist account of our obligations to future generations*. OUP Oxford.
- [5] Scanlon, T. M., Sen, A., & Williams, B. (1982). *Contractualism and utilitarianism*.
- [6] Ashford, E., & Mulgan, T. (2007). *Contractualism*.
- [7] Hare, R. M. (2014). *Ethical theory and utilitarianism*. In *Contemporary British Philosophy* (pp. 113-131). Routledge.
- [8] Mill, J. S. (2016). *Utilitarianism*. In *Seven masterpieces of philosophy* (pp. 329-375). Routledge.
- [9] Posner, R. A. (1979). *Utilitarianism, economics, and legal theory*. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 8(1), 103-140.
- [10] Slawinski, N., Pinkse, J., Busch, T., & Banerjee, S. B. (2017). The role of short-termism and uncertainty avoidance in organizational inaction on climate change: A multi-level framework. *Business & Society*, 56(2), 253-282.
- [11] Ribó, O., Candiani, D., & Serratosa, J. (2009). Role of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in providing scientific advice on the welfare of food producing animals. *Italian Journal of Animal Science*, 8(sup1), 9-17.
- [12] Gregory, P. J., Ingram, J. S., & Brklacich, M. (2005). Climate change and food security. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 360(1463), 2139-2148.
- [13] Parfit, D. (1987). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford University Press.
- [14] Steel, C. (2013). *Hungry city: How food shapes our lives*. Random house.
- [15] Mills, J., & Driscoll, M. (2022). *The hidden health impacts of industrial livestock systems: transforming livestock systems for better human, animal and planetary health*.

- [16] He, B., Fan, J., Liu, N., Li, H., Wang, Y., Williams, J., & Wong, K. (2012). Depression risk of 'left-behind' children in rural China. *Psychiatry research*, 200(2-3), 306-312.
- [17] Bostrom, N. (2002). Existential risks: Analyzing human extinction scenarios and related hazards. *Journal of Evolution and technology*, 9.
- [18] Seibert, M. K., & Rees, W. E. (2021). Through the eye of a needle: an eco-heterodox perspective on the renewable energy transition. *Energies*, 14(15), 4508.
- [19] Soper, K. (2023). *Post-growth living: For an alternative hedonism*. Verso books.
- [20] Beckstead, N. (2013). On the overwhelming importance of shaping the far future. Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies.
- [21] Mokyr, J. (2018). The past and the future of innovation: Some lessons from economic history. *Explorations in Economic History*, 69, 13-26.
- [22] Wolff, J. (2019). *Ethics and public policy: a philosophical inquiry*. Routledge.
- [23] Wuthnow, R. (2010). *Be very afraid: The cultural response to terror, pandemics, environmental devastation, nuclear annihilation, and other threats*. Oxford University Press.