Our responsibility towards future generations

Lars Löfquist, Theology Department
Outline of the lecture

1. What is ethics?
2. The concept and sphere of moral responsibility
3. Theories about how future generations can be included in the sphere of responsibility
4. Principles that capture what the responsibility require from us
What is ethics?

- Ethics is the study of moral actions, behavior, rules and norms = how we should live together
- Ethics is a philosophical subject
- This lecture is about **normative ethics** which focus on how human beings should act if they want to act morally (and rationally) = about the ideal actions and norms
- What people actually do might be different!
  (Analogy = we can talk about what the ideal car driver would do even if people generally are bad at driving)
“sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (p 43)

We must act in a way that is compatible with future generations abilities to satisfy their needs!
The concept of responsibility

**Formal definition:** If A has moral responsibility towards B, this means that A owes B something, either because B has some morally relevant characteristics, or because B stands in a morally relevant relationship to A.

**Two aspects:**

1) A should do something to B. (e.g. a parent should take care of his or her child)

2) B has some characteristics, or is in a relation to A, that give good reasons for this demand. (e.g. the child exist because of decisions of the parent)
The sphere of responsibility

- Exactly who are we responsible for?
- Who should count as a object for responsibility, i.e. who has moral status?

Current issues
- How to include people living in other countries?
- How to include animals?
- How to include eco-systems?

- What about future generations? Can they be included in the sphere of responsibility?
Characteristics of Future generations

• They might be a very large group
• We will never meet or know them
• We can hurt them but they cannot hurt us
• We do not know much about their preferences, values or needs
• They are a faceless collective - we cannot identify individuals
• Their existence is dependent on our actions
• **Two basic ethical problems:**
  – *Why* are we suppose to care for FG?
  – *What* are we suppose to do for FG?

• **Ethical theories provides answers to these questions**

• **Important:** It is not certain that we agree about the answers to these questions. Plus: *Why should caring about other people be a matter of democratic decisions…*
Why care about future generations?
• Generations are bound by chains of love
• I love my children – they will love their children → I should love my grandchildren
• We have indirect a responsibility to care for FG because we care about our own children
• Pro: Captures the importance of parent feelings
• Con: Love is not a transitive feeling! I do not love someone just because somebody I love love that person.
J. Rawls - contractualism

- Society is governed by a contract between the citizens, “the original contact” – a thought experiment.
- Everybody’s interests should effect the rules governing society and everybody should benefit from them.
- The contractual parties should be seen as without knowledge of their own specific life and interests (behind the “veil of ignorance”) - they are impartial.
- Pro: Captures the idea of treating people equally and that we should not let our biases shape the rules of society.
- Con: Can we even imagine a contact between the generations? And what rules would different generations agree to?
A. De-Shalit

- We are all part of a trans-generational community – stretches over the generations into the past and the future
- Our own identity is formed by being part of this group which provides meaning for our lives
- Pro: Fits with our understand of humans as social beings – the community is important for the individual
- Con: What about caring for FG that will not be part of my community? How long time does the community extend into the future?
How far into the future?

Sphere of responsibility:
Passmore – 3 generations…
Rawls - how many generations can be part of the contractual parties…?
De-Shalit – 10 generations…

Problems:
Nuclear waste – hazardous for 3000+ generations
Climate change – permanent change affect all generations
What should we do for future generations?
Two possible principles:

1. Just savings principle (what to do)
   - Each generation saves (capital, resources, nature…) for the generations coming after it

2. Precautionary principle (what to avoid)
   - Avoid doing anything that might harm future generations

General problem: How much should we give to FG? Should we reduce our own living standard; and if so, with how much?
Summing up

• Ethical theories provide several ways of explaining our responsibility for close future generations.

• Still difficult to imagine the foundation and implication of responsibility towards remote future generations.

• Even if we all agree that we should care for future generations – we can still disagree about what we should do.
Questions

1. If we knew that the world will end 100 years from now, in what way would that change our perspective on how we should live?

2. Is there certain acts that are always irresponsible and unjust to future generations?

3. Who should decide whether the precautions we take to avoid hurting future generations are enough or not?