VERITAS, Nº 40 (Agosto 2018) 49-65 ISSN 0717-4675

Do we have moral obligations towards future people? Addressing the moral vagueness of future environmental scenarios

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Abstract

In this paper, I will be primarily concerned with moral issues regarding future people and the environment. When it comes to the future, we have deontological and epistemic limitations. The closer to the present, the higher the certainty and the knowledge we have about facts. Thus, when we intend to find moral clarity regarding a future scenario, we deal with an inverse relation between certainty and time (the further to the future, uncertainty gets higher). The main problem is that most ways of dealing with moral issues about future scenarios do not address this relation, and rather focus on things that seem to simplify and clarify the uncertainties of the future. In response to this, I propose a different approach, one that operates neutrally and timelessly dealing with the uncertainties of the future while providing moral groundings that can help to clarify the future's state of moral vagueness.

Key words*:* Future people, environmental ethics, moral obligations, non-identity problem, moral vagueness.

¿Tenemos obligaciones morales para con personas futuras? Tratando la vaguedad moral de escenarios medioambientales futuros

Resumen

En este artículo me enfoco primordialmente en problemas morales asociados a las personas futuras y al medio ambiente. Cuando se trata del futuro, tenemos limitaciones tanto deontológicas como epistemológicas. A mayor cercanía con el presente, mayor es la certeza y el conocimiento que tenemos. Por lo tanto, cuando intentamos encontrar claridad moral respecto de escenarios futuros, nos vemos forzados a lidiar con una relación inversa entre certeza y tiempo (a mayor distancia en el futuro, mayor falta de certeza). El gran problema con esto es *que la mayoría de las perspectivas para afrontar algunos problemas morales del futuro no reconocen esta relación y, más bien, se enfocan en cosas que simplifiquen y clarifiquen las incertidumbres del futuro. En respuesta a esto, propongo una aproximación diferente, que opera desde la neutralidad y la atemporalidad, lidiando con las incertidumbres del futuro y, al mismo tiempo, proveyendo fundamentos morales que ayuden a clarificar el estado moral de vaguedad del futuro.*

Palabras clave*: Personas futuras, ética ambiental, obligaciones morales, problema de la identidad personal, vaguedad moral.*

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* MSc in Philosophy, The University of Edinburgh. This article is based on my MSc dissertation funded by CONICYT as part of their programme BECAS CHILE, folio 73170156.

Recibido: 9/Febrero/2018 - Aceptado: 11/Mayo/2018

1. ABOUT THE FUTURE

One of the possibilities we have when dealing with the future is to talk about the rights of future generations or future people. This, however, is not the most desirable way to confront the issues the future implies. Rights require a set of claims that must be met in order to be valid, and when we are dealing with future people, these claims are not determined to exist, given that future people's own existence is merely possible. Thus, when referring to future people, how can we weigh their rights? Can they have any rights at all if they do not exist yet? When we discuss future people, what exactly are we referring to? A set of conceptual clarifications is needed to simplify our reference to future people. This will help us avoid further misleading interpretations or references that the concept of future people could involve.

The concept of future people is commonly used as equivalent or similar to that of future generations. Frequently, the use given to the concept of future generations or future people lacks precision. At times, it is used to refer to existent children as the next generation, or also their possible offspring as the generations to come, and so on. Nonetheless, there is a relevant difference when we talk about future generations as the future lives of already existent people and future generations as those that will come and do not yet exist. Furthermore, it is also different to talk about people I do not know yet, and could meet in the future and hypothetical people, which can be helpful to imagine scenarios that can clarify some issues or help us conceive possible solutions for present concerns. To avoid such vague use of the term future people, from now on consider the following distinction to be applied:

1. Non-existent people: refers to future people or generations whose existence is not determined, but can be affected by our present actions.
2. Distant present people / generations: refers to current people pictured in a distant future / children or babies as the generations to come but that already exist.
3. Hypothetical people: refers to possible not-existent people that can help to hypothesize scenarios, but they are not causally related to our actions.

Consider this. We need to decide whether it is a good policy to allow the construction of a nuclear energy research facility. We have certainty about the short-term benefits of this project, and certainty that the project

is free of any environmental hazard in the next 10 years. The benefits of the research could allow us to improve several scientific developments and reduce the amount of time that would take if we use other research resources. Nonetheless, an environmental risk study is required by the competent authorities to approve the project and there is a list of risks that will affect future generations.

In this example, the way we refer to the concept of future people is extremely relevant. If we talk about future generations as only distant present people, it does not seem that we have many reasons to be against this project. However, the only information we have is that there is a 10-year period free of risk, how this will affect non-existent people is unknown. If we approve this project, we need to have a clear idea of what would be morally relevant, only the distant present or also those who will come to exist at some point. Whatever we choose will nevertheless affect the scenarios for those future generations that do not yet exist, the problem is we do not know how. While dealing with this, having the hypothetical future people concept is helpful. While we are unable to predict the future consequences of our actions and its impact in a total spectrum, by generating hypothetical scenarios that consider the possibilities regarding future people based on our current knowledge, we can provide the necessary elements to the decision-making process needed to develop environmental policies regarding the future. But more of this later, for now let us consider these concepts to clarify why an argument based on rights is not a sufficient proposal.

Let us consider the following view. Edith Brown Weiss in her article "In Fairness to Future Generations and Sustainable Development" argues in favour of intergenerational rights. She states that these rights are not possessed by an individual, but rather a whole generation. They are subject to "temporal context" (Brown Weiss, 1990: 205), meaning that every generation is related to past, present and future generations. This concept of 'a right' is independent of existence, so it does not attach to an individual, avoiding assigning a right to a non-existent being. For her, these rights "can be evaluated by objective criteria and indices applied to the planet from one generation to the next" (Brown Weiss, 1990: 205). Under this view, rights regarding environmental issues and sustainable development are given to a whole generation, demanding a certain quality of life to be preserved and assured for those future generations. And although this is a well-intended proposal, the problem with this line of thought[1], as I see it,

[1] With this line of thought I intend to refer any argument that follows the general guidelines that claim rights to non-existent future people without clarifying the concept

can be split in three main issues:

1. The use of the concept of future people is ambiguous, sometimes used as equivalent to non-existent or hypothetical future people;
2. there is a misconception of the capacity to have a right and to claim it;
3. it presumes a moral obligation associated with the construction of environmental policies.

What Brown Weiss is referring to as future generations is not entirely clear and, as I have argued above, when it comes to dealing with applied cases such distinction is important. If what she considers to be a future generation happens to be equivalent to non-existent future people, then their having rights becomes absurd. If they do not exist how can they have rights? She could argue, however, that this distinction in this case is irrelevant, because when they do come to exist, they will have rights. So, if we are referring to distant people or future non-existent people it makes no difference when we are talking about rights. Furthermore, even if it were just hypothetical people, her idea of intergenerational rights still applies. Let us agree with her on that, and say that when talking about rights such a distinction is not relevant. This leads me to the second issue, the misconception related to the capacity to claim a right attributed to a generation.

Nation 'N' has the right to use a certain portion of the sea for economic purposes based on their sea rights. 'N' however is not an individual, it represents a larger congregation of individuals under the political concept of a nation. They need, however a legal representative to claim those rights when dealing with any issues related to the sea rights of 'N'. The same occurs with a company, a company has obligations and rights, but those rights need an individual that represents the interests of the company. The company, at root, is a conglomerate of individuals. A larger conceptual group, as such, cannot have a claim for their rights. Those rights belong to all the individuals that are part of the group, and they can either individually claim those rights or claim them through a representative. In either case, the claim cannot come from the nation or the company itself, as an abstract agglomeration. In the same way, a generation qua generation does not have a claim for a right, such as the right to have access to natural resources or non-polluted air. The difference is that when referring to a generation, there is no clear representative or legal structure that

of future people or that misconceive the claim an individual has for a right.

could take care of their claim to their rights.

And this leads me to the third issue. Just because we are not able to justify the existence of rights applicable to non-existent individuals, we cannot presume that we have a moral obligation associated with it. Thus, what leads us to act in a certain way cannot be the pressuring claim for rights of those future people. Future generations as such, can be said, will have rights once they exist, the problem is that as a generation they do not have a system to claim them. This, however, is highly debatable, given that the only requirement missing in this view would be to provide such representative and then the idea of future generations having rights could be sustainable as a concept. Therefore, contrary to this, I claim that future generations are incapable of having any rights. Same as future nations. Even if we could agree that nations do have rights, as a conceptual entity and not an individual, they still satisfy the ontological requirement to have the claim to any right, their existence is actual. With this, I state that the mere possibility of existence is not a sufficient ontological basis to have a right. Because future generations do not exist and they may or may not come to actually *be*, they cannot have rights based on their potential existence. Then, the moral claims associated to the construction of environmental policies must be found elsewhere. The concept of future generations rights, the idea that we have a duty towards non-existent people, will be left aside from now on.

These critiques can also apply to other views that support the same claim of harm to future generations. For example, Avner de-Shalit in his book *Why Posterity Matters. Environmental policies and future generations* talks about a transgenerational community, establishing very clearly that there is a difference between close and immediate future generations and those very remote. But, unlike what I intend to defend, he states that we have obligations towards both of them, positive obligations in the case of the closer generations and negative obligations in the case of the latter. Positive obligations seek to prevent damage to close generations, whereas negative obligations intend to avoid harm and relieve potential distress for distant future people. Furthermore, he states that "[...] we should stop producing nuclear energy, because future generations are likely to suffer because of potential leakages [...]" (de-Shalit, 1995: 13). The difference with Brown Weiss is that de-Shalit argues for the concept of a community, derived directly from our own sense of community which also provides, according to him, obligations towards future generations. And, without undergoing any further metaphysical justifications he presents the idea of community and argues that:

> [...] if one accepts the idea of a community in one generation, including the

> principle that this entails certain obligations to other members, then one should accept the idea of a transgenerational community extending into the future, hence recognizing obligations to future generations (de-Shalit, 1995: 15).

He also criticizes views that are against the possibility of future generations to have rights. He states that "future people, *if and when* they exist, will have rights" (de-Shalit, 1995: 114). Therefore, we have reasons to conserve the rainforests or reduce CO_2 emissions. But that claim states that hypothetical future people can have rights. The key is in the 'if' conditional that denotes only a possibility of existence that is not determined, thus claiming that we have obligations based on rights that might never come into existence.

Ultimately, my proposal intends to avoid the problems that arise from presuming the rights of future obligations and our obligations towards them. If I act now, I can only violate the rights of those existing now. This cannot be said of those who do not exist, therefore we cannot claim that we have obligations based on their rights. Despite this, what we can do is to come up with reasons to act now in relation to people who do not yet exist. It is a subtle difference, but I consider it to be a stronger approach. The motivations we have to act and protect our environment now, are sufficient to be part of a structure of timeless reasons that can be concerned with future consequences. The main difference is that the foundation to act is based on our knowledge of the present circumstances. Our reasons to act now, if timeless, will be invariant, meaning that they will provide a sufficient reason for action in a future scenario as well. Deontologically, our present knowledge and our present scope of risks and harms is the main source we should consider when discussing future events that are morally relevant. This, however, is no arbitrary measure. Along this essay my intention is to show that we are disorientated when we address the future by giving it the same deontological and epistemological status as the present. The unpredictability and risks of the future only provide misguided motivations and constraints that make it more difficult to clarify our reasons to justify any action or policy we intend to propose. Applying moral claims or concepts based on the unknown future is unpromising. Instead, I claim we should apply reasons oriented to the present into the uncertain future, reducing the problems associated with the lack of epistemic access we have to future events.

2. THE NON-IDENTITY PROBLEM

Another recurrent problem that arises when discussing the future is

the non-identity problem that became well-known mostly through Derek Parfit's work. In his book *Reason and Persons,* Parfit discusses if we have any obligations when it comes to causing the existence and the type of existence of other human beings. Here he introduces the non- identity problem. If we are dealing with a decision regarding the existence or the type of existence future people will have, a paradox becomes evident.

Before relating the non-identity problem to environmental issues, it is useful to clarify what exactly the paradox behind this problem is. The non-identity problem's focal point is to address any type of moral obligation we think or claim to have in relation to people who will come to exist as consequence of our present actions. More specifically, the paradox arises when dealing with cases in which the existence of these future people is deficient, unhealthy or in some way damaged. When presented with a choice, if an action 'x' by person 'a' will ineludibly cause a harm by bringing into existence future person 'b', then 'a' can either avoid doing 'x' so no future person will come into existence or it can do 'x' under different circumstances, causing the existence of future person 'c' instead of 'b'. In this case, 'c' will be a completely different person from 'b', making them non-identical. The paradox here relies in our moral claims in respect of why would it be morally wrong to bring future person 'b' into existence. Both 'b' and 'c' do not share the same identity, therefore, if 'a' decides to cause the existence of 'b', no harm is done to 'b' because he is not worse-off than he could have been. By postponing or changing the circumstances of action 'x', then a completely different person will come to exist. Thus, although causing a flawed existence of another human being seems intuitively wrong, no harm is done. Therefore, is not entirely clear why it would be morally wrong to be against it.

Now, consider the previously mentioned case of a nuclear energy research facility. Depending on our actions now, if we decide to approve it or not, either way that set of actions will trigger a chain of events, affecting future non-existent people and distant people differently. People that already exist will change their lives based on this policy and, therefore, all these alterations will eventually lead either to the existence of different people in the future or it will alter the state of affairs in which they will live. But, if we intend to argue that we should not follow the nuclear energy policy, we cannot do it based on an assessment of harm made to future people. That set of people is not effectively worse-off than it would have been if the policy was accepted, because it would have not existed. The problem is, as Elizabeth Harman points out, that: "In non-identity cases, it intuitively appears that there is harm and that the harm is morally explanatory of the wrongness of the actions" (Harman, 2004: 90). Although it seems that some actions can be morally wrong because they make future

people worse-off, the conditions to claim that they are worse-off are not met, because there is a case of different identity; whichever action we choose, it will involve a case of non-identical future existent people.

One of the examples Parfit presents is that of a teenager girl having a baby (Parfit, 1987: 358). By having that baby now, she will not provide the best possible life for him, questionably not even a good one. However, a claim could be made that if she waits to have the baby, then the child will be better-off. But, then we would be, according to Parfit, mistaking the identity of both future babies. These two possible children are not identical, they do not share the same identity and, therefore, we cannot claim that the first child is worse-off than he could have been, because otherwise he would have never existed. There is no harm done to any of those potential babies by bringing them into existence. It seems, notwithstanding, that although no harm is done, the second choice is better. But, since there is no comparison of welfare possible between those two babies, assessments of harm are not in order.

This means that, for example, the teenage girl although she does no harm to that child, she is not considering all the factors that can make the decision to bring a child into existence the best possible outcome. Thus, if she happens to get pregnant voluntarily or involuntarily, we cannot claim she is harming that child by bringing him into existence, comparing him with a hypothetical future baby that *could* have been better-off. If the teenage girl waits and has a baby years after, when having everything planned, we may call that a more responsible decision, but in terms of harm assessments neither of these choices can be recognized as causing harm. The welfare of neither baby can be compared in order to determine whether any harm has occurred.

Now, the discussion about the non-identity problem has prevailed for a long time and a consensus has not been reached. Several philosophers aim to solve this paradox in different ways, either by arguing that there are reasons against any harm and reasons in favour of any benefit, those are views based on a harm-based account (Harman, 2004; Gardner, 2015); or by suggesting that there is not a problem at all and that we should accept the conclusion of the non-identity problem merely as an argument (Heyd, 2009; Boonin, 2014). However, irrespective of this on-going debate, I want to stress that the non-identity problem is not a problem that concerns me directly, because my proposal intends to elucidate that our way to achieve the best moral outcome regarding the future, cannot be achieved by conceptualizing into the future. The importance of the discussion about the non-identity problem is that it makes us consider a hypothetical future scenario that could be a potential harm for future people. It seems to be true that given the non-identical status portrayed in the non-

identity cases, future people or generations are not harmed because their well-being is not diminished by the circumstances of their birth. But, despite agreeing to this there is still a relevant question to be answered: is it fair that we give them a worse start in life that we could have provided if we acted otherwise?

If we keep exploiting natural resources and having no restricted limits on the CO_2 emissions, several consequences will follow. If we do not act to change the foreseeable consequences of these issues, then we will be affecting negatively the lives of distant existent generations and those of future generations. Consider the case of natural resources. We can either conserve them for future generations, making things harder for us but better for upcoming future generations, or we can deplete those resources and get to exploit all the benefits associated with them in our present population, depriving future generations from those resources. Both choices will affect future people differently, but then which one is the *right* choice? Depletion will involve a lower quality of life for several years, this for Parfit "must provide some moral reason not to choose depletion" (Parfit, 1987: 363). But if we remember correctly how the non-identity problem works, that moral reason is not so clear when we consider that if the option of conservation is chosen, then the conception of those future people will be affected. Thus, any possible suffering associated with the scenario brought by choosing depletion ceases to exist, because those allegedly harmed never existed. Under this paradox, we end up being restrained to conclude that there is no harm done and that those future generations are indeed not worse-off. Nonetheless, not choosing depletion intuitively seems to be the correct choice. Is it because we are choosing the worse start for those future people based on our scope of action now? But if, as I stated earlier, we cannot have obligations based on non-existent people, then how do we weigh those factors that intuitively seem to advocate for their well-being?

My proposal aims to answer that question. We need a clear and morally justified answer that tells us if we should choose A or B in cases where our knowledge about the future is limited or non-existent. However, what I propose here is not a definite answer to what to do, but rather a constant structure that will allows us to reach an answer, diminishing the complications that future hypothetical scenarios entail. If we consider the non-identity problem as a problem, then we might spend years, as many philosophers have, searching for a consensus. Accordingly, I state that we should leave this non-identity problem aside, and focus on the reasons we have to respond to these issues now. What should concern us, morally, is to have certainty and sufficient reasons to justify our moral claims about the

future. This implies that whatever the set of future people that comes into existence, if we have sufficient reasons for action, then they will be *better-off*, because our reasons will guarantee the best possible action we can perform for present and future scenarios.

If we intend to justify our actions based on the analysis of future consequences, then we could end up being forced to choose what intuitively seems wrong, and claim it as morally permissible. To avoid this, I propose to re-focus our moral discussion into the present. Particularly when it comes to environmental issues, preservation policies and present solutions that seek to prevent and diminish the damages done to the environment will secure an improvement of the quality of life for present, distant future and non-existent future generations. Present actions will influence everyone's future outcomes. Therefore, future moral concerns should be assessed under present moral structures of reasons, influenced by a timeless structure and, therefore, having a timeless application.

3. THE CONCEPT OF TIMELESS REASONS

I have mentioned across this paper that the concept of timeless reasons will be crucial to my proposal, here I will explain what this concept means and how it will be useful to facilitate the policy-making process related to environmental issues. Thomas Nagel in his book *The Possibility of Altruism*, develops a rich concept of timeless reasons. His idea, however, is to have a consistent explanation for altruism. Therefore, I intend to focus only on the main structure of his proposal putting an emphasis in its link to the future. Nagel manages to present a clear structure of reasons that highlights a person's temporally distant stages, conceived under one lifetime. This will function as the grounding structure to later justify our approach to future consequences and our moral relation to non-existent people.

First, a conceptual clarification can be useful. It can be a common mistake to conceive reasons for action as equivalent to having a desire to do something, but that is not the case. One of the motivations I can have to act is my desire to fulfil a need or simply for pleasure and that can provide reasons for me to justify an act according to such desire. In the case of desires, the desire itself must be always operative, meaning that desires are only motivational while they are active; desires may cease to exist and I do not need to accept or want them later. Reasons can, therefore, originate in motives but they can, in some cases, represent values that remain and those are the reasons we will be concerned with: timeless reasons. These timeless reasons imply that if we have reasons for supporting certain values now, those same reasons will support them in a future stage.

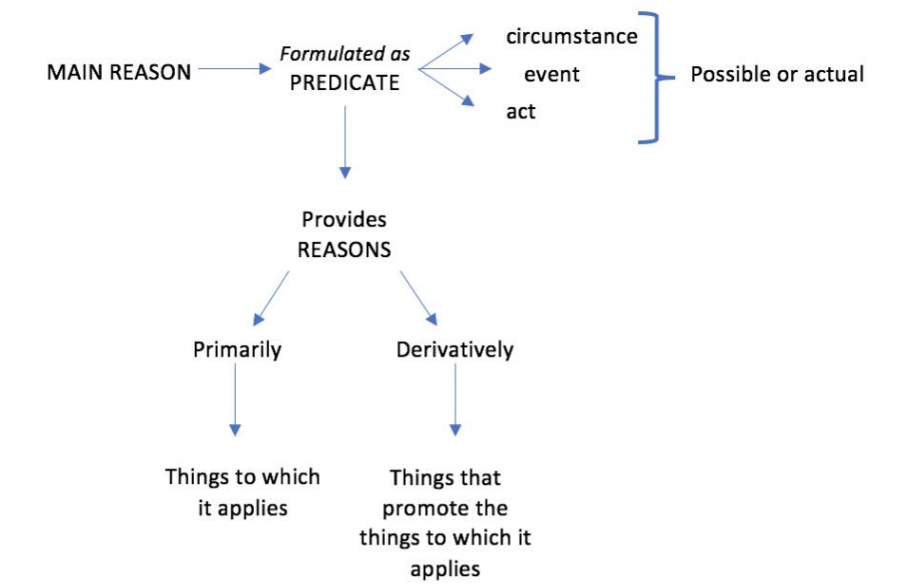
This, however, does not mean all reasons are timeless, there are also dated reasons. Dated reasons can only provide motivation at the current time of the event to which there is a reason, whereas timeless reasons can motivate you at any time. "Timeless reasons avoid dissociation because they permit tenseless formulation of practical judgements [...] That allows us to make the same practical judgement about a single situation from different temporal standpoints and in different tenses" (Nagel, 1978: 72). This neutral standpoint to address reasons, is what provides us with a timeless resource we can use to refer to the future without depending on our epistemic access of the future itself.

Imagine the following scenario. President X intends to create a new set of environmental policies for his government. To express this, we could say that during the year 2017, president X has a set of reasons Y to create this set of environmental policies for his government. However, this way to formulate our reference to these reasons implies a time constraint, making the reasons dated. Now let us formulate it as a timeless reason, transcending time constraints: president X has a set of reasons Y to create this set of environmental policies for his government. This, however, includes a subjective set of reasons, because is president X the one with those reasons, the set of reasons Y predicates something particular about president X. Instead, the formulation of timeless reasons we need must avoid time and personal constraints, making a timeless and agent neutral claim such as: *There is a set of reasons Y for president X to create this set of environmental policies for his government*. The difference is subtle, but relevant. When this structure is used to formulate reasons its application is timeless. The set of reasons Y is not bounded to a particular subject, but rather it is the case that in this instance it is used to express something of the subject president X. Objective timeless reasons can be the predicate of any subject under any act, circumstance or event. This means that the set of reasons Y there is for president X will be timelessly valid on another actual or possible future circumstances and subjects. By applying this structure, we guarantee that the reasons we have to justify our actions now, will still be valid to any future subject and any future event. The importance of this is that when struggling with the uncertainties of the future by applying these timeless reasons to our decision-making process, we are providing the best possible reasons. And these reasons can only be obtained based on a certain epistemic status: our present knowledge.

But, environmental policies not only consider measures to fix past damages, they also seek to prevent further devastation. This means that there can be future consequences intended in the creation of this policy, but we cannot have certainty of its results. Therefore, if the reasons to

create an environmental policy now are objective and timeless, then whatever the set of future people, they will benefit from the current policy. The crucial distinction is that the creation of this policy responds to the best possible moral outcome conceivable at present time, without hypothesizing or grounding justifications based on potential future people or events. To promote a future end, what we need is to have a reason to promote that set of events based on the expectation that there will be a reason for it. This gives timeless reasons a temporal neutrality of the agent. Nagel's structure of timeless reasons presumes a conception of oneself as temporally persistent, this means that "present has no special status" (Nagel, 1978: 60) ontologically speaking. The reason's influence travels over time and present time is just another moment in our lives. However, the impersonal conception of objective timeless reasons allows us to promote actions to achieve a set of events based on our current knowledge of what would be the best possible outcome, including present, distant present and future consequences. Timeless reasons, then, present reasons for things to occur.

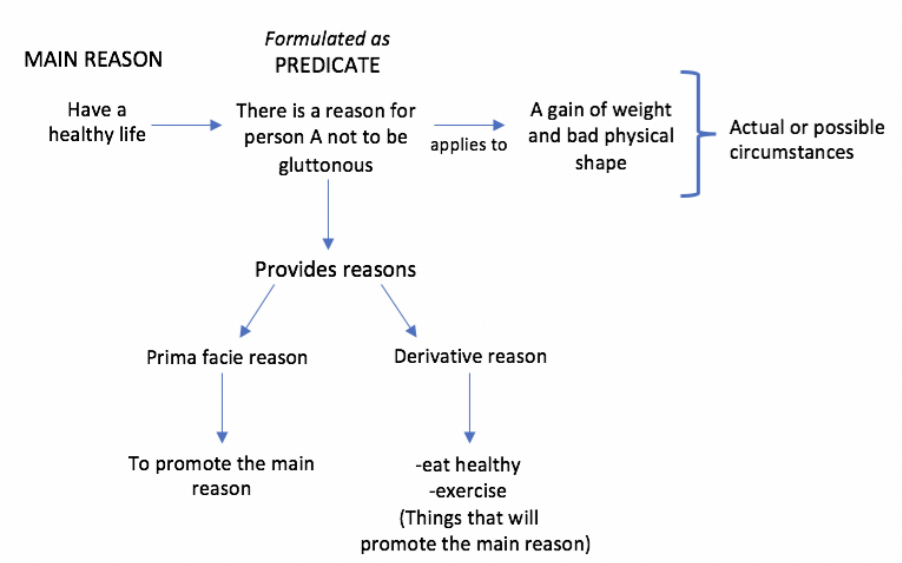
But how exactly do these timeless reasons can work to create a policy? To clarify this, consider the following diagram.



Every reason, as Nagel states, is a predicate we make asserting that for all persons, events, acts or circumstances, possible or actual, if the predicate is true of the set of events we have reasons for, then the person has a

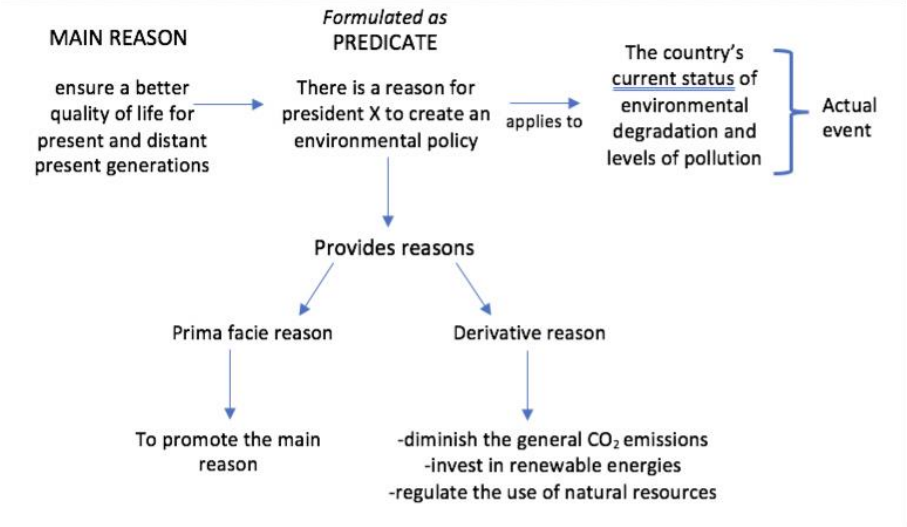
prima facie reason to promote such events. The main condition for this will be that if it is tenselessly true that at the time of that event, a reason-predicate applies to it, then the conditions to make a claim based on those reasons are met. This means that the same reason president X has in 2018 to base his claim in favour of a climate change policy, will also apply in the future. Because the value of the timeless objective reasons that justify a set of events to happen in time now imply that in a future time there will be a reason for that set of events to happen, when they happen.

To simplify the explanation, consider the case of gluttony.



There is a main reason for person A not to be gluttonous, this reason is to have a healthy life. Thus, person A has a prima facie reason to promote the main reason. This implies that, derivatively, person A has a reason to eat healthy and exercise because both of those actions promote the main reason by producing a health. This reason can be a predicate of an actual or a possible circumstance, meaning that person A could have reason to have a healthy life by preventing an unhealthy life or overcoming a current unhealthy lifestyle.

Now, let us apply the example of president X to the diagram presented above.



There is a reason, which is to ensure better quality of life for present and distant present generations (that will have uncertain future consequences), for President X to create a climate change policy. This means that there is a prima facie reason to promote the main reason. The main reason also provides, derivatively, reasons that promote the main reason and, therefore, should constitute the environmental policy.

The main goal of president X is to ensure a better quality of life to those present generations he can account for, because he has enough knowledge, information and certainty that those results will, in fact, imply the best possible moral outcome for them. However, the promotion of this main reason implies the promotion of future consequences under that same structure of justification. Therefore, although we are not claiming to have any duty or obligation towards future generations, then what presents itself as the best moral outcome now, will also share the same value associated to present reasons in the future, ensuring that our actions today will construct the best possible set of future consequences for future generations.

However, there is still one thing to explain. We need a set of criteria to recognize a timeless reason. It has been clarified that a determinant factor is that they are not time-relative, nor they are subjective. Therefore, one criterion must be its temporal and agent neutrality. Because of this neutrality, while hypothesizing a scenario to test a reason, we must be able to conclude that given the same circumstances, there is and there will be a reason to have it, because "in general, no one wants anything future [...] without a reason derived from the expectation of a reason" (Nagel, 1978; 44). This adds another criterion. Timeless reasons need to be generated by

a motivation that is directed primarily to the present and derivatively to the future. This implies that timeless reasons must be originated under the knowledge and circumstances we have access to. They must be epistemologically accessible. Therefore, if we are looking to determine which scenario is the one we need to pursue, then the process of decision-making must be influenced by present facts and present state of affairs. And if we have timeless reasons, we can have expectations for our reasons to be equally valid in the future, and we can reasonably expect that future people will benefit from our decision, because the best way we have to relate to the inaccessible future is by ensuring the best possible reasons to justify our decisions now and, derivatively, generate the best possible future starting scenario.

Regarding how the timeless structure works, it is important to highlight that when it comes to its application, it should only be used in long-distant future scenarios. The previous example of president X illustrates how the structure of timeless reasons works, but when dealing with such a case in which our knowledge of the future consequences and the ways to resolve the issue are certain, it would be redundant to use this structure. The main benefits this structure can provide are in cases in which our epistemic access is limited by temporal distance, when our clarity of moral concepts fades.

CONCLUSIONS

This proposal, withal, does not seek to provide infallible answers or solve once and for all our ways to conceive the future. Conversely, the main purpose discussed here is to provide a general scheme, and the ways in which it can be effectively applied are far-reaching. This means that the structure can be adapted to the particular needs of the type of policy intended. The policy can have a higher impact in relation to future non-existent people or distant people. In any case, it always suggests the same consistent approach to future consequences. We solve any issue by limiting it to our epistemic accessibility. We do not presume any obligations to future people, but we do consider the range of impact of our actions as far as our current knowledge can grasp. This entails that any action we undertake given our present circumstances will grant the reasons we have for our actions now, and they will timelessly prevail, guaranteeing the best possible start we can provide for those generations to come. The most advantageous way to respond to our intuition to care for future generations is not by granting them ontological or deontological status they do not and cannot have, but rather acting based on the best reasons we have to justify our moral acts *now*.

When dealing with environmental deliberations that have a distant and long future impact, adopting a temporally neutral and agent neutral position is crucial, whatever the institution involved in the development of a policy. Maintaining a timeless structure as the basic filter to select the reasons that will guide the construction of a policy, clarifies the path for other factors to be accounted. When the best possible moral outcome is visualized, then we can apply other relevant factors under that system. Ultimately, the structure of timeless reasons as guidelines for environmental policies seeks to expedite the philosophical discussion behind the construction of environmental policies. Environmental ethical debates often can entangle our way to deal the future when searching for moral guidelines for action. My intended purpose here was to simplify the way we deal with the future, thus improving the efficacy of the policy-making process founded on a morally justified background.

Finally, I argue that we do not have moral obligations towards future or non-existent people. However, in accordance with our moral intuitions, we shall respond to moral uncertainties of future scenarios with a timeless reasons approach, based on our actual epistemic access, thus giving future generations the best possible start we can.

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