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The problem of the future in postwar Anglo-American political philosophy

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Abstract Among the conceptual problems raised by climate change is that of how to think about the future. Theories of intergenerational justice and other accounts of obligations to the future in Anglo-American philosophy tend to argue that the remote future matters morally. Where did these arguments come from? This essay explores the roots of contemporary ideas about the remote future in debates that took place among Anglophone philosophers in the 1970s.

It is often said that climate change is the greatest challenge we face. We know what to do about it but we cannot find the will. The problem is politics, not science. But climate change also raises conceptual challenges. One of the thorniest is how we should think about the future: what it will look like, how it relates to the present, and what, if anything, we owe to it. In debates about the impact of climate change, strategic questions about prevention and adaptation are closely tied to those of moral responsibility – not just who should pay today but what our obligations are to those alive tomorrow.

The history of political thought contains many different visions of the future, and conceptions of time: utopias and dystopias, radical apocalypses and millenarian disasters, plans, models and predictions of exponential or steady growth, corruption or decline. The reasons given for why people should care about those futures are various: people have worried about their legacies and glory, posterity and humanity under God, their nations, and their grandchildren. In the West, modern conceptions of time have tended to be linear; modern reasons for caring about the future have consequently tended to connect its value to the present (or past). Over the last few decades, theories of 'intergenerational justice' have become particularly important to the future thinking of philosophers, especially when it comes to

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climate change (Gosseries and Meyer 2009). In these, the future (and the remote future in particular) tends to be seen – by philosophers but also by their readers across the social sciences, as well as by activists, policy-makers and the general public – as something we should care about. We have obligations to future generations far away, and there are moral reasons to care for the effects our actions may have in the long run (Goodin 1985; De-Shalit 1995). The future is understood as something valuable in itself, independent of its relationship to the present. How and when did philosophers come to think that the remote future, and the lives lived in it, mattered morally?

Contemporary views about what obligations we have to future generations, given climate change, tend to rely on an abstract idea of the future, that is a recent innovation. Its roots are in part to be found in debates that took place among British and American philosophers between the late 1960s and early 1980s. These years marked a turning point in both the history of environmental thought and of Anglophone political philosophy, and these debates – in which philosophers reshaped old ideas to address new problems in ways that would have lasting consequences – took place at their intersection.

The 1960s and 1970s saw major transformations in environmental social movements, politics and lawmaking which brought new problems, and visions of the future, into philosophy (Gottlieb 2005). As anxieties about overpopulation and resource depletion increased (Robertson 2012), some worried that these processes would lead to 'ecological crisis' and, potentially, total breakdown, in the near future: after the Second World War, nuclear war had been the presiding apocalyptic fear – the bomb the crisis that could transform the future – and those concerned about the 'population bomb' borrowed the nuclear rhetoric (Ehrlich 1968). For others, overpopulation, if it were to be a catastrophe, would be one with a different timeframe. Ecological crises looked set to unfold not as imminent disasters, but in slow motion – their uncertain effects playing out over the long term (Meadows et al. 1972). In the context of these predictions – which, like those made about climatic change since the 1980s (Robin et al. 2013), were often exponential in their scope – thinking about the moral claims of the future required a different framework.

These changes encouraged philosophers to experiment with ways of valuing the future: first, in debates about overpopulation, then environmental problems more broadly. They were accompanied by transformations in the discipline of philosophy, which opened up the space for them to do so. One of these transformations was from a framework dominated by utilitarianism to one focused on contractual theories of justice. Another was the return of metaphysical problems. Together these changes enabled a specific shift, which proved to be a turning point in the intellectual history of climate change – from a focus on the value of the near future to the far future.

In the 1960s, political philosophers – then in the process of reinventing their subject with new theories of obligation and distributive justice – had mostly focused on the present, with little concern for the future as a distinct object (Rawls 1958; Walzer 1970). When they began to look forward, their focus was largely on the short term (Golding 1972). But as they confronted environmental problems over the course of the 1970s, they looked to the long term – to what they called (often interchangeably) the remote, distant, long-term or far future. With resources from moral and economic theory, they developed ways of thinking about the long-term future that accommodated the new environmental politics, but at a cost: they were often counterintuitive and hard to accept. These new ways of thinking had unintended consequences for philosophy. Theories that had a flexible idea of time and weighed the present against the future were replaced by more rigid and static accounts, that put the far future on equal moral footing

with the present and seemed to make the future, and philosophy, timeless. This timeless future was at once abstract and detached from ordinary politics and everyday decisions, and also a way of accounting philosophically for the practical challenges of environmental politics that required a view of the long term. It is this view of the future – shaped in the years when the new environmental politics became a philosophical concern, but before climate change became the dominant environmental problem – that continues to frame debates about obligations to future generations today.

1 Utility, savings and population

Until the 1970s, few Anglophone liberal philosophers took seriously environmental questions or the challenge they raised for future thinking, and the new Cold War 'futurology' and forecasting left philosophy relatively untouched (Andersson 2012; Gilman 2003). But in the years before environmentalist concerns brought the future into sharper focus, two other debates, which took place within the remit of utilitarianism, broadly understood, did: the first about economic growth, investment and savings for the future; the second about population. Both of these would inform the development of new ideas of the future in the 1970s.

Utilitarianism, and its heirs in welfare economics, was well equipped to take account of the future. Yet it often had a hard time doing so: it gave away either too much or too little. If utilitarianism was taken to be temporally neutral, and all possible people in the future included in calculations about welfare, large sacrifices would be demanded of the present for the sake of those future people. If, by contrast, only those alive today were included in the calculus, utilitarian calculations were biased towards the present. This latter position was held by many classical utilitarians, for whom the democratic majority in the present was sovereign over the future (and by some later economists, for whom the preferences of the living were what mattered). In mid-twentieth-century economic debates about the rate of savings, the balance went the other way. When in the 1920s Frank Ramsey presented his mathematical solution to the problem of whether a nation should consume or save its income (if its goal was to maximize welfare over an infinite time-horizon) and formalized the terms of debate about the optimal allocation of resources across time (Ramsey 1928), he advocated a zero rate of pure time preference: the future was given equal weight with the present. For A. C. Pigou, the task of government had been to bear in mind the distant future and act as a 'trustee for unborn generations', counteracting the short-termist thinking that might exist for individuals (Pigou 1920).

By the 1960s, when economists debating growth asked whether, and at what rate, governments should invest or save on future generations' behalf, they tended to see these earlier arguments as too demanding. To counteract high savings rates that gave the future excessive weight, they used discount rates to give a present value to future goods. The idea behind the 'present value formula', a centuries-old technical practice, is that things in the present are worth more than things at some future remove; the technique of exponential discounting provides a way of calculating how much more (Deringer 2013). In twentieth-century microeconomics and with the rise of cost-benefit analysis, it came to be understood as a descriptive model for how individuals made intertemporal choices – a model for action as well as a tool for pricing the future (Samuelson 1937; Frederick et al. 2002). One of its implications was that the distant future became nearly worthless: why care about that future when it means so little in the present? In the 1960s growth debates, economists deployed the discount rate as a way of

making savings efforts fair across generations. They disagreed about what was at stake: some argued that governments should take measures to counteract individual time preferences, and not base their decision-making on the model of consumer sovereignty these implied; some that if individuals discounted the future, then democratic governments, merely aggregating their preferences, should too (Dobb 1960; Marglin 1963). Others questioned whether discount rates could even solve these kinds of political temporal trade-offs (Robinson 1990), and how to conceive of the future for which investments are made: in terms of 'heirs', the 'future generation' as a whole, or 'future generations' on an infinite time horizon (Sen 1967). Despite disagreements over whether these pricing tools could and should be extended from individuals to collectives, discussion of the formal questions about optimal rates of savings, investment and social discount moved the debate in a similar direction (Tullock 1964; Baumol 1968): giving the future the same weight as the present – which, on utilitarian, and other kinds of maximizing, arguments would lead to high savings rates to secure welfare in the future – was seen to lead to unacceptable sacrifices. Savings needed to be offset by a high discount rate; the welfare of future generations would have less weight. Biases towards the future were corrected by temporal devices that favoured the present. It was this welfare economic view of the future that would be reclaimed by philosophers (both utilitarian and not) in the 1970s.

A similar move was made in debates about population, within which the future orientation of utilitarianism was likewise ambivalent. A number of population control advocates tacitly deployed a temporally neutral utilitarianism that included people across time in the calculus. This formed the basis of arguments about 'lifeboat ethics', made famous by ecologist Garret Hardin, who thought present generations needed to take extreme measures to address over-population – akin to pushing people off a lifeboat to stop it sinking (Hardin 1974). Others anxious about overpopulation went the other way, and included only those alive in the present. For philosopher Jan Narveson – at this point in his career, a utilitarian – morality was about the relations between particular, currently existing persons. It was 'person-regarding' – it took as the only 'ground of duty…the effects of our action on other people' (Narveson 1967).

Narveson used this point about the temporally bounded nature of morality to make one about population. By the late 1960s, liberals concerned with overpopulation had largely dropped their explicit concern for eugenics (Meade 1964; Bashford 2014) for more sanitized debates about 'optimum population size' (Dasgupta 1969). Classical 'total' utilitarianism traditionally supported additions to the population: adding individuals (even, sometimes, suffering individuals) meant increasing utility. In the context of overpopulation worries, this seemed toxic. Narveson was one of a number of philosophers who tried to rescue utilitarianism from these conclusions. By claiming all morality to be 'person-regarding', he argued that the question of whether or not to add to the population was morally neutral. At the very least, utilitarianism did not require population growth. He also argued that there were duties not to bring suffering people into the world. Utilitarianism could be made amenable to overpopulation anxieties.

For person-regarding theories like this (as for economic subjective preference theories) the present was what mattered. If particular already-existing persons were the ground of morality, the only real concern was what happened here and now. It was hard to say on this view why we should care about the existence of the human race. It was also hard to get from this to a theory of the future, as a separate object of inquiry, concerned with people who do not yet exist. Utilitarianism might have been flexible, but in these formulations it was either too biased towards the present, or too demanding of it. Narveson's theory was received as a provocation for utilitarians to do better.

2 Rawls and future generations

But utilitarianism was under attack, and so was this present focus. It was in this period that the ideas of John Rawls came to dominate the philosophical landscape. With the publication of *A Theory of Justice* (1971) many sidestepped population and swapped utility for justice. Rawls himself stated his aversion to total utilitarian arguments that saw population expansion as a route to increasing welfare (and he briefly mentioned – showing his mid-century colours – that a 'reasonable genetic policy' might be important to a just state) (Rawls 1971). But Rawls's theory was a contract theory, and extending a contract to include future generations was a harder task than making utilitarianism compatible with population control. Given the radically non-reciprocal relationship between present and future, how could contractual relations hold across time? Rawls's temporal view had a present bias, which limited how far he could go to giving the long-term future an independent value of the kind that subsequent philosophers, more concerned with ecological questions, would deem necessary. Yet he tried to provide the basis for an account of intergenerational relations. As with the turn from domestic to global justice – which also began in the 1970s, and which Rawls enabled but did not take – this provided a framework for his followers to apply principles of justice to the future, allowing them to move beyond discussions of population and think about the future and the 'environmental crisis' in broader terms. Rawls may not have crossed the bridge to the far future, but he built it.

Rawls thought a reciprocal relationship with the future was impossible, and his principles of justice – the principles of liberty and equality chosen to regulate society by the parties meeting in his hypothetical choice situation, the original position – did not apply to it. His alternative was what he called the 'just savings principle'. This would circumscribe relations between generations by setting an appropriate savings rate and constraining the accumulation rate, so that the actions of current generations would benefit the future. For Rawls the 'ideal society' was one 'whose economy is in a steady state of growth (possibly zero) and which is at the same time just'. The point of the savings principle was to secure growth until that society was reached, and to maintain affluence once it had been. Rawls was not interested here in the steady state economics rapidly gaining traction among environmentalists (Boulding 1966), but instead brought into political philosophy the problem of savings and growth that had so preoccupied economists. He provided a solution to the savings debates, setting the rate by an appeal to justice rather than utility. Less concerned with resource depletion and survival than stability, Rawls, like many before him, wanted to make institutions last; he believed that to do so, endless growth was unnecessary.

Though Rawls suggested that considerations about the future could be seen as part of obligations in the present, and part of the 'natural duty' to uphold just institutions, his main argument about the future was the savings principle. Since his theory turned centrally on the choice of principles in the original position, he had to explain why it would be chosen as the principle to regulate relations across time. The parties in the original position were meant to represent people from every part of society. Would they include people from one generation, or every? Rawls argued that incorporating parties from all generations would not work (to think of the original position as including all actual or possible persons would 'stretch fantasy too far'). Instead he introduced the 'present time of entry' interpretation. The parties were contemporaries, but the veil of ignorance blinded them to which particular generation they collectively belong. They shared a fixed temporal location in the present from which they chose the principles to govern the future. This introduced a problem. Why should the parties

care about the future? If they were biased towards their own interests in the present, why should they save? Rawls's solution was to stipulate a 'motivational assumption' to remedy present bias. The contracting parties were 'regarded as representing family lines with ties of sentiment between successive generations'. They save, that is, because they care about their children (and their children's children). It was this additional stipulation that gave the future value. It was thus the near future, the extension of the present, that mattered. Rawls did not try to give the far future an ethical value in itself (Rawls 1971).

When it came to the future, Rawls's theory pulled in different directions. He accepted the linear, infinite time-horizons of growth theory, yet he also sought to view society from the 'perspective of eternity'. On the one hand, he thought morality was time neutral, and objected to discounting the well-being of future generations on time preference alone: the future was not less important simply by virtue of being further away. On the other, though he saw discounting as irrelevant to ideal theory, he conceded that in less than ideal circumstances, discounting the future might be necessary. Within his argument for the principles, the motivational assumption entered as a way of coping with present bias, and, although it did the extra work of making the parties in the original position want to save, it only made them care for their descendants (two or three generations along) – not for the remote future. Moreover, those generations could not demand much – only savings, not the kind of redistribution that Rawls's difference principle (which required that inequalities work to the advantage of the least well-off member of society) demanded of current generations, nor the sacrifices of temporally-neutral forms of utilitarianism. It was not obvious that people alive today owed anything as a matter of justice to strangers in the future, nor was it realistic to ask partial people, with limited time-horizons, to save for posterity in general – only for their children. Ties of sentiment were the motivational glue between overlapping generations, and ties of sentiment could only stretch so far. It was up to just institutions – if we could get them – to reach the parts of the future that sentiment could not. The bias towards the near future, over the remote, was largely preserved (Rawls 1971).

3 Near to far

Rawls's view of the future seemed, like that of many before him, tied to the present. Though he firmly distinguished between his account of the concerns of parties in the original position and those of real-life persons, his interpreters read him as slipping between the two. We care about the future, he implied, because of its ties to us. In other variations on this argument, we care about it because we care about our nation and its future, or existing institutions, groups or communities and their futures. If that is why the future matters, it does not follow that the far future also matters. The people there may not be tied to us in any way, or much like us at all. In debates about climate change, this last fact – that people in the far future are unrelated to us – is often seen as irrelevant. We should, environmentalists say, care about the far future regardless of its ties to us. But why?

One answer is because we care about 'nature'. The idea of nature having intrinsic value gained ground in the 1970s, and just as God had provided reason for nineteenth-century thinkers' concerns with posterity, so did a timeless nature and a commitment to 'the earth' ground environmentalists' concern for the remote future (Purdy 2015; Cronon 1995). But not everyone who worried about environmental problems resorted to nature to explain that future's value. Philosophers who wanted to see the far future as independently subject to moral theory initially looked, as all philosophers did in the 1970s, to Rawls's theory for guidance. Yet those

preoccupied not with stability but with the earth's survival recognized its limits: with its focus on immediate successors and family ties, and on goods to be saved instead of harms prevented, it could not easily accommodate the new environmental politics (Barry 1977b).

So they looked elsewhere. Ethicists returned to older notions of community that encompassed the living, the dead, and those yet to be born (Golding 1972; Callahan 1971). Others saw these as exclusionary: they implied we have obligations to future generations only if we expect them to 'live in ways that would lead us to regard them as part of our "moral community" (Barry 1977b). They lacked appeal for liberal philosophers, who offered two further alternatives. The first expanded Rawls's theory into a full intergenerational justice theory, which gave value to the far future. The second provided another way out of the impasses of earlier population theory, by drawing on the resources of analytical metaphysics and moral philosophy. Both marked a shift towards a new view of the future.

During the 1960s – in part, as a result of the Vietnam War – philosophers had looked increasingly to practical ethical and political problems. In the early 1970s, as they turned to interpreting Rawls, they expanded his framework to cope with new dilemmas. In the wake of famines and oil shocks, they attempted to stretch moral principles and rules across space – to encompass not just domestic but global politics – and also time. Initially, attempts to temporally extend Rawls's theory built on the growth and savings debates: economists formalized his savings principle or extended the difference principle into theories of intergenerational equity that demanded the kind of present sacrifices that Rawls, in his opposition to time-neutral utilitarianism, had wanted to avoid (Arrow and Rawls 1973; Solow 1974; Hubin 1976; English 1977). Soon, discussions took an ecological turn.

One of the first to amend Rawls's theory across space and time in light of ecological concerns was the British philosopher Brian Barry. Whereas Rawls had thought about the future in terms of savings, Barry shifted the emphasis to harms. He tried to abandon arguments that justified obligations to the future in terms of prudential concerns for the welfare of the living and their descendants. The focus on the near future often went alongside a focus on local contexts of obligation: families, but also communities or nation-states – political entities in which future interests could be taken as synonymous with present ones. Those who looked to immediate successors largely took the state as the primary entity (Rawls 1971; Hubin 1976; Laslett 1970; Keynes 1963). Barry instead saw environmental problems as international. He looked beyond the state and to the long term, to different horizons of obligation.

In essays written between 1975 and 1983, Barry explored how to accommodate the temporal problems that Rawls's theory neglected, in particular, 'sleepers' – actions that have more significant effects in the long run than the short run, or those that are beneficial in the short run and harmful in the long run. Traditional theories that grounded obligation in mutual protection, self-interest or community could not give Barry what he wanted: an account of obligation that included the remote future, after 'our grandchildren' are dead (Barry 1977a). Utilitarianism, with its time-neutrality, had long-term potential. But because it could demand huge present sacrifices, Barry thought utilitarians in practice appealed to ignorance and uncertainty as a 'smokescreen' for inaction. If we knew definitively what the future holds, we could sacrifice welfare today for welfare tomorrow; given it is radically uncertain, we should focus on the present and discount the future (Passmore 1974). Moreover, presentist utilitarianism did not fit with common-sense intuitions about the future. As Narveson had shown, it did not provide an argument for caring about the extinction of the human race – something that, Barry thought, we do care about.

So Barry looked to contract theory, developing an account of intergenerational obligation in which future generations would get what they were owed as a matter of justice. He swapped Rawls's contract that, in his terms, depended on a concrete relationship of reciprocity, for a purely hypothetical contract. By the time Barry presented his alternative, Rawls's original position – what kind of persons the contracting parties were, what moral principles they would choose, how risk-averse or rational they were – preoccupied philosophers. The problem of overpopulation and existence, in the form raised by Narveson, shaped some of the responses to Rawls. Should the original position include actual people, potential people, or all possible people, and how would Rawls's choice of principles determine the existence or non-existence of future people (Richards 1983; Kavka 1982)? Barry thought Rawls's 'present time of entry' interpretation too restrictive. He was also sceptical of attempts to enfranchise all potential people in the contract. If utilitarian principles were chosen, population expansion could be justified at the expense of quality of life. Equally problematic, the difference principle would lead the parties to 'opt not to bring the human race into existence' at all (they might decide, with the worst-off prudentially in mind, that it was better not to have been born) (Barry 1975). Barry therefore conceded the contractarian approach could not deliver on the problems of population and potential existence (Barry 1977a, 1978). But it could when it came to obligations to the future in general.

To make the contract work for the future, the parties in Barry's original position were drawn from every generation, but would not know to what generation they belong. They would have to choose the best for themselves on the grounds that they could, individually, come anywhere in history. So they would choose a principle that would leave the future open. For Barry this was the principle of equality of opportunity, which held that future generations who are denied choices could be compensated. By not differentiating between near and far, or then and now, his contract justified obligations of justice to the remote future (Barry 1977a, 1983).

Barry wrote that for Rawls the 'limits of caring were the limits of justice'. In his challenge to present- and interest-focused utilitarianisms, and to Rawls's short-term focus, he tried to go beyond sentimental ties, giving independent ethical value to the future without resorting to nature. He did so by flattening time. But he also suggested that flattening time might mean giving up on a philosophy focused on human interests. Theories that could accommodate the importance of the remote future could not be based on the interests of present people alone. Though this might look unrealistic in the present, detaching obligations from interests was the only way to accommodate what he saw as our common-sense intuitions – our aversion to the extinction of the human race, or our sense that the remote future matters. As the British political theorist John Gray wrote to him, theories that accounted for these ideas in terms of current human interests were 'offensively anthropocentric' (Gray 1975). Barry was reluctant to give up on such theories, but he saw doing so as the only way of generating a new ethic appropriate to an ecological age.

4 The remote future

The questions about existence that Barry set aside were precisely the ones taken up by the British philosopher who provided another route to the far future, and whose ideas would transform the trajectory of intergenerational ethics – Derek Parfit. Parfit's ideas made waves when they circulated in manuscript following a 1971 Oxford seminar, attended by Narveson and a young Peter Singer (Narveson 1973; Singer 1976). Out of the utilitarian debates about

population came one of Parfit's famous ideas, the 'Repugnant Conclusion'. This provided a restatement (with stronger proofs and a sense of inescapability) of the idea that total utilitarianism justified adding additional people (as many as would have lives worth living) to a population as a route to increasing welfare – and that this was the case even if their lives might be miserable, and even if it led to grave overpopulation (Parfit 1976, 1984). Parfit also made other arguments about time and the future, some of which originated in, but were not tied to, the population debates. One of the most controversial was his claim that our later selves are more like separate people than they are like us. Most people care about the future because they think it is *their* future. For Parfit this was a mistake. Personal identity was not what mattered. People were not continuous selves, but aggregates of experience.

Of all Parfit's separate arguments about identity and the future, perhaps the most immediately influential in debates about population, and later climate change, was his 'non-identity problem'. This was the claim that our decisions today will affect what individual people will exist tomorrow; different courses of action bring different people into existence in the future. This had major implications for future thinking: when we talk about whether future people will be better or worse off as a result of our choices, actions and policies, we cannot expect that the same people will exist to be affected by one or other of our choices (Parfit 1971).

On Narveson's person-regarding (in Parfit's terms, 'person-affecting') view, particular persons were subjects of morality. Combining Parfit's insights with this view led to a controversial position. Since when we act in a certain way in the present, different particular people will be born, no one would be worse off because we squandered resources; the happiness of existing people cannot be compared to their happiness if they had not been born. It therefore did not matter morally whether or not resources are depleted; we have no obligations to the future, because there are no particular persons to have obligations to. Parfit wanted to avoid this conclusion. In place of the person-affecting view, he presented an impartial one. If morality did not always affect a particular person, then it was not morally significant that different future people were affected by our actions. Depleting resources could still be morally objectionable – we just had to get rid of the idea that the only way it could be was by affecting someone in particular (Parfit 1983).

Both the non-identity problem and Parfit's impartial ethics were enormously influential. What did this mean for valuing the future? The impartial view made time irrelevant. As Barry pointed out, considerations of uncertainty often made time irrelevant in practice, and in democratic theory – the political equivalent of person-regarding moral theory – only the interests or preferences of participating citizens were taken into account, leading to the prioritization of the present: those alive were what mattered. For Parfit, the moral irrelevance of time went in the opposite direction. His impartial ethics led him to put equal value on the short term and the long term. The remote future became the same as today.

Parfit provided a way of thinking about the far future that seemed to collapse time altogether. Rawls had tried to integrate time into his theory (discounting and saving were ways of doing so), even if he never managed to break out of the static temporal frame entirely (in part because he imported the static frame of his economist contemporaries as he did so). Where Rawls had struggled to choose between different ways of coping with time, and had provided only a half-hearted critique of present bias, Parfit gave a powerful condemnation. He provided numerous arguments against discounting, which by the 1980s had become a standard component of social-scientific future thinking: not only did it entail treating matters of morality as if they were questions of monetary value, but it was a clumsy way of accommodating temporal problems. Its absurdity was obvious, Parfit suggested, if time was compared with space: 'no one thinks that we would be morally justified if we cared less about the long-range

effects of our acts at some rate of n per cent per yard'. Time should be the same (Parfit 1983, 1984; Cowen and Parfit 1992).

Parfit's broader theory reinforced this: not only must we be careful about imposing future consequences of our own actions onto other people, but since our future selves are not simply extensions of our present selves, but in important respects separate persons, we should be equally careful of imposing those consequences on our future selves. The question of when became irrelevant (Williams 1984). This opened the door to extreme ethical impartiality, in which the value of states of affairs was independent of their impact on particular people. The same move enabled a robust defense of the moral importance of the remote future.

5 Climate change and possible futures

The environmental politics of the 1970s provoked philosophers to argue that the future could not be morally irrelevant. What began as a debate about population, utility and savings ended up as a broader discussion of how to think about moral relations over time. As the decade closed, they refashioned theories of justice to accommodate temporal change and obligations to the future. But taking time seriously was not the same as taking the future seriously, and those sensitive to temporal change often disregarded the future, while those concerned with the future were not necessarily concerned with the passage of time. Rawls injected time into his theory, but he did not focus on the future as a problem in itself. His was also a kind of linear economic time, not an environmental time wary of growth, crisis and decline. Barry's was more like the latter, and he tried to get a fuller theory of the future out of a theory of justice to accommodate that perspective. Parfit tried to show the limitations of person-regarding utilitarian theories, and that the far future should be understood on a level footing with the near. The answer to the problem of how to value the far future thus came in many forms, but that which won out among liberal philosophers was the one that made the future timeless, eternal and subject to morality. To get to that timeless future, they paid a considerable cost. Barry backed away from the idea of human interest. Parfit gave up on the ordinary notion of the continuous self.

This shift to the remote future was part of a broader trend towards abstraction within moral and political philosophy, which has brought it far away from politics, and has been strongly criticized (Galston 2010). Much in these debates about the future does appear politically detached. For instance, the non-identity problem that has preoccupied philosophers since Parfit can seem less pressing when the focus is on institutions, not individuals. Political institutions, legal and corporate persons, have a different kind of existence to individual persons. They are designed to outlast them, and need not suffer from the same problems of identity; though the non-identity problem does not disappear with an institutional focus, institutions can manage the concerns of whatever population arises in the future. But there are other ways environmental politics might actually require abstraction. If we are going to address the problems posed by climate change, we need ways of imagining the remote future and reasons to care about it that go beyond caring about 'our grandchildren'. This is what the philosophers of the 1970s – in their efforts to reinvent and re-moralize timeless theories, and to show why the far future might matter without relying on either God or nature – sought to provide.

Their ideas set the terms of contemporary debate. Since then, the question of what the present owes the future has consistently been posed in terms of individual obligations to

remote generations, the scope of the non-identity problem has broadened considerably, and a timeless view of the remote future has been assumed. After the 1980s, these ideas framed the moral approach to sustainability and climate change too. Instead of tying the value of the future to the present, philosophers worked backwards from the remote future – whether through arguments about overlapping generations, discount rates, or other means (Broome 1992; Dasgupta 2008; Caney 2014).

The dominance of this abstract vision of the future has meant that its usefulness, politics and history are rarely considered. This essay has given an overview of the latter, but it should also raise other questions. Though the politics of the remote future might require abstractions, the fact that getting people to care about climate change is still so difficult speaks to the ineffectiveness of abstractions of this peculiarly rigid kind. This aspect of the intellectual history of climate change is, at least in part, the history of philosophical ideas that have been political failures – even if, since their authors did not intend them for politics, they may not have failed on their own terms. It is, however, worth considering the relevance of – and alternatives to – these ideas, introduced into environmental thought decades ago. The problem of 'sleepers' may not have gone away. But it is no longer obvious that the remote future remains the correct timeframe for environmental politics. If the consequences of climate change now look likely to take effect in the short or medium rather than the long term, we might in any case need to update our view of which future matters.

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