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## The duty of Contemporary society towards future generations

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**Abstract:** At the start of the 20th century, humanity rarely worried about its long-term survival. However, advancements in science—especially the creation of atomic weapons—have highlighted serious threats to future generations. Problems like overpopulation, resource depletion, and environmental pollution now make the future uncertain. This raises a key question: what responsibility does society today have to protect future generations? This question has gained attention in philosophy and environmental studies, as ongoing events challenge humanity's long-term prospects. This article focuses on the philosophical exploration of this issue.

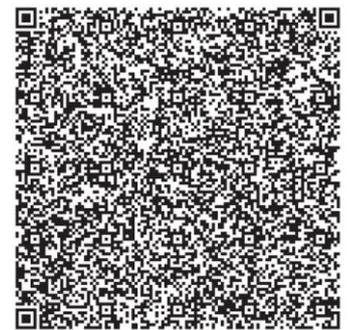
**Introduction:** In the early 20th century, concerns about the future of humanity were rare. But as science advanced, especially with the creation of atomic weapons and recognition of their risks, people began to worry about future generations. Issues like overpopulation, dwindling resources, and pollution have raised doubts about the future. This has led philosophers and environmentalists to question whether society today has a responsibility to protect future generations. The decisions we make now directly affect their existence, making this question both practical and essential in discussions on environmental issues today.

**Keyword:** Contemporary, Society, Duty, Environment, Ethics, Utilitarianism

**Obligation of Contemporary society:** The central question here is: what moral responsibilities does our current society have toward future generations? And if such duties exist, how far do they extend? Another key question is whether fulfilling these duties requires us to sacrifice something now for the sake of a better future society. For example, if future generations aren't likely to be happy, to what extent are we responsible for ensuring their existence? These questions can be explored from multiple perspectives, considering both the scope of our obligations and the conditions under which we would or wouldn't be responsible for future lives. Now we are highlighted two important perspectives on moral responsibility toward future generations, each based on different ethical theories: -

**a) Rational Agreement Theory:** In this view, morality arises from agreements among rational beings who are currently able to participate in such discussions (J. L. Coleman). Since future generations can't join these agreements directly, this theory argues that there's no binding duty for the current generation to protect or benefit them. The rationale here is that moral responsibility requires active participation, which future people can't offer yet.

**b) Hedonistic (or Utilitarian) View:** This perspective emphasizes maximizing happiness or minimizing suffering (Kraus). According to Jeremy Bentham the 'fundamental axiom, *it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong*' (Burns and Hart). From this standpoint, the cumulative happiness of all people—both current and future—should be considered. This could imply that we should act with future generations in mind to maximize overall well-being, even if they aren't present to



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voice their needs. These perspectives are often balanced in practice. Although future generations don't exist yet, they are still human and capable of experiencing suffering and happiness, much like people in other places at present. The moral question is unique because it requires us to consider duty across time, rather than just among existing people. Thus, we often land somewhere in between, recognizing that future people matter morally but also struggling with how much responsibility we bear for their welfare (Talbert). Here's a simplified breakdown of these points:

- ii) **One-Way Relationship:** The future generation benefits from the present generation, but it can't give anything back in return.
- iii) **Inheritance of Knowledge:** Future generations will inherit what we discover now, such as advancements in science and technology.
- iv) **Unknown Population:** We can't know the exact number of future people, as this depends on choices made by society today.
- v) **Dependence on the Present:** The very existence of future generations relies on the actions and decisions of the current generation.

The above features suggest that it is not easy to bring future generations within the bounds of morality. Even if we impose two qualities of morality good and bad on future generations, we do not get a counter- answer from them. Again, the existence of future generations depends on present generation. Since the progress of scientific knowledge and technology changes human life, but it is difficult of, imagine for current generations what this progress can change in the life of future generations (Sikara).

Looking at the fourth characteristic, we see that – since the existence of future generations depends will and reluctance of the present generation, so that the number of future generations can be determined by the current generation. In a way, the wealth distribution of future generations depends on the present people. These two points must be noted that, if the current people have no responsibility towards future generations, then they will not have to worry about what the future population will be. On the other hand, if we assume that the responsibility of the people who are present in contemporary time is towards the future generations, as a result the present people should think about the future populations. Because resources have to be distributed according to that population. As a result, a policy must be determined, which based on the resources will be distributed (Sikara). Theoretically can be concluded that first we have decided whether we will give birth to future generations, then we have to decide how the present generations will have moral relationship with the future generations.

'Duties of Contemporary generation to future generations'- when we analyze this concept, we have to face several problems. Some time we can say that it is the responsibility of the present generation to sustaining human civilization. Naturally, arise a question – what is mean by duty to human civilization? This question needs to be properly explained. One could say that present generations have an obligation of future generation to keep human civilization alive. In this view, the focus of this duty of the present generation is the individual, not an abstract concept (Sikara). When we see that this individual are future generations, we are face with a difficult problem. If we don't do what needs to be done to sustain future generation, there will be no future people. as a result, we cannot say that we have neglected our duty to anyone. Because it is meaningless to say that I had or have a duty if those to whom I have neglected my duty do not actually exist. According Immanuel Kant "*ought Implies can*" ((editor)). That is, if it is considered that I should do any duty, then I will have the ability to do that duty. So, I can do my duty. And a task can be done if it is real (mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann). But if the future generation exists, then I can conclude, it is my duty to sustain the future generation. If future people do not exist in the present time, then I cannot have any duty towards them. Even it doesn't my duty to birth to them. If anyone thinks that it is the duty of the Contemporary generation to engender to future generation, because if future child is not born, then our situations may be worse or the situation of future and current both generations may be better. It must be remembered that the concept of 'better or worse' is determined by economic and social conditions of a society. So, it is not easy to an adequate philosophical interpretation of the concept of - 'it is the duty of the



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present generation to sustain the human civilization'. If a man promises to another that he will bear a child. In that case, the responsibility bearing a child will depend on the duty to keeping his promise. Although many people bearing the children for his instinct or out of love for the child. But neither these supports the duty to bearing to future children. As a same manner, it is difficult of a philosophical explanation to the conviction- 'I have neglected my duty by not bearing future generations'.

Even if we follow Utilitarianism, will not get special benefits. For according to this doctrine of a person should do that action if the action can produce that "the best thing to do is what contributes of the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people" (Bentham). Now the question is can we increase the utility of all or most people by bear future children? A good explanation of this question would be if we could explain who are all people. Are we announced about both the future and the present here? If one included only present people without including future people then he can say that I have not diminished the utility of the future generation by not bearing to them, because no one exists whose utility we can claim to have diminished. On the other hand, if someone by including future generations in utility calculation, then one can say that if a child can be born in future, the child will have utility even if the average utility is higher. So, it is our duty to bear to that child. In this situation arise a question: what does greater than average utility mean? Even if we go beyond the calculus of utility, it goes against our common sense, because in this case the duty of the individual is to produce children, failing which the individual's action would be called immoral.

Several key questions come up in this discussion: Does bringing a new life into existence increase that child's well-being? Are we doing them a favour by engender? While a child may grow up to be happy, because that child did not exist before, we can't definitively say if being born improves or reduces their well-being. One could assume that future generations start with a neutral utility of zero and then try to calculate the utility from conception through birth and beyond. However, this leads to a problem: it equates present people, who experience happiness or unhappiness, with future generations who don't yet exist and therefore don't have any experiences at all. This viewpoint conflicts with the general belief that existing life and potential life hold different moral weight

The central question raised here is if I declare a duty or moral obligation towards someone, does that person have to actually exist? Can I have a moral duty to someone who doesn't yet exist? It's clear that if a person is born—meaning they exist—then I have a duty to them as a fellow human being. But do I have a duty to bring that person into existence in the first place? It seems challenging to argue that I am neglecting a duty to a future child simply by choosing not to bring them into existence. Additionally, it's difficult to claim that a future person's well-being suffers if they are never born. One could argue that because life is inherently valuable, we have a duty to create it whenever possible. However, this raises the question of what it truly means to say life is intrinsically valuable.

To summarize, this discussion revolves around whether our moral obligations extend to potential future people who do not yet exist and the implications of life's intrinsic value in relation to creating new life.

We've touched on some complex and deeply debated ethical questions that philosophers and ethicists grapple with, especially in medical and environmental ethics. Let's break down some of these issues: -

- i) **Intrinsic Value of Life and Harmful Bacteria:** If all life is considered intrinsically valuable, does that include harmful bacteria? Generally, we prioritize the well-being of humans over microbes that can cause harm, not necessarily because bacteria are less valuable but because human life is seen as having higher ethical standing in many frameworks. However, some environmental ethics might argue for minimal harm toward all life unless it's necessary, balancing human health with the broader ecosystem.
- ii) **Valuing Human Life Over Animal Life:** Many societies prioritize human life based on characteristics like consciousness, intelligence, social bonds, or the capacity for suffering. However, this is not universal. Some ethical frameworks, like utilitarianism or animal rights theories, argue for considering the welfare of animals more seriously, especially as they can experience pain and suffering (Jena).



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- iii) **Duty to Bring a Life into Suffering:** This raises important questions about potential suffering and parental responsibility. If it's likely that a child will have a life filled with suffering, some argue that it might be more ethical not to bring them into that situation. Yet, it's challenging to make these decisions, as "terrible" is subjective and difficult to quantify. In practice, medical ethics often allow for the termination of pregnancy in cases where the quality of life would likely be severely compromised.
- iv) **Concept of "Better Than Death":** Deciding whether a life is so filled with suffering that nonexistence might be preferable is one of the most difficult ethical calls. In medical ethics, the goal is often to reduce suffering, which may sometimes lead to decisions that prioritize quality of life over life itself.

These issues remain largely open to interpretation and personal values, with different cultures, religions, and ethical theories offering various insights.

Do we mean to say that after death a person's utility is zero and this utility increases with his birth and survive in the world? We must remember that the word death is used only in reference to an existing person. A non-existence circumstances cannot occur in human life. No one exists in this world about whom we can say that his utility will increase if he dies or his utility will decrease if he is born. Although death may increase one's utility but it is not applicable to future generations. When we try to establish a principle saying that if a future child would have a healthy life, it's our duty to bring that child into the world, things get complex. If we consider the well-being of everyone, people fall into three groups: past, present, and future generations. Some in the current and future generations will be directly connected to this child, while others won't be. For instance, my neighbor might be involved in the child's life in a way that someone in another country would not. This shows that calculating the impact, or utility, of the child on everyone is very difficult.

### Conclusion:

From the above discussion, the concept of "duty" only holds meaning under certain conditions and in relation to other ideas. Without this context, the notion of duty loses much of its relevance. People strive to build a safe and harmonious society based on an unwritten agreement to live peacefully together. However, natural resources are finite and will eventually be depleted. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on our collective responsibility to safeguard and sustain these resources for future generations. Failure to do so could place them in a challenging and resource-scarce world. Ultimately, the choices we make today will profoundly shape the world that humanity inherits tomorrow.

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