

Respect for Future Generations

Laszlo Zsolnai

Future generations are not yet born human beings. Practically we can imagine them as people who may live in the next 200 years. Activities of present generations may affect the fate of future generations for the better or for the worse. What we do with our natural and cultural heritage mainly determines the way future generations may live their own life in the future. We as presently living human beings have an undeniable moral responsibility toward future human beings.

The Ethics of Responsibility

Hans Jonas argued that the ethics of responsibility involves not only the existence of future human beings but also the way they exist. The conditions of the existence of future generations should not cause their capacity of freedom and humanness to disappear. „Thus moral responsibility demands that we take into consideration the welfare of those who, without being consulted, will later be affected by what we are doing now. Without our choosing it, responsibility becomes our lot due to the sheer extent of the power we exercise daily.” (Jonas, H. 1996, p. 99.)

In his opus magnum "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age" Hans Jonas presents the *impact of modern technology* on the human condition. (Jonas, H. 1984). Jonas' major theses are as follows:

- (1) The nature of human action is altered and enlarged, with the magnitude and novelty of its works and their impact on man's global future.
- (2) Responsibility is a correlate of power and must be commensurate with the latter's scope and that of its exercise.
- (3) Replacing the former projections of hope an imaginative 'heuristics of fear' is needed, which tells us what is possibly at stake and what we must beware of.
- (4) Ethics is made at such an underpinning of man's duties toward himself, his/her distant posterity, and the plenitude of life under his/her dominion.
- (5) Objective imperatives for man in the scheme of things enable us to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate goal-settings to our Promethean power. (Jonas, H. 1984, p.x).

Jonas argues that the nature of human action has changed so dramatically in our times that it calls for a radical change in ethics as well. He emphasizes that in previous ethics, all dealing with the nonhuman world, that is, the whole realm of *techno* was ethically neutral. Ethical significance belonged to the direct dealing of man with man, including man dealing with himself: all traditional ethics is *anthropocentric*. The entity of "man" and his basic condition was considered constant in essence and not itself an object of reshaping techno. The effective range of action was small, the time span of foresight,

goal-setting, and accountability was short, control of circumstances limited. (Jonas, H. 1984, pp 4-5.).

New dimensions of responsibility emerged because nature became a subject of human responsibility. This is underlined by the fact of the irreversibility and cumulative character of man's impact on the living world. Knowledge, under these circumstances, is a prime duty of man and must be commensurate with the causal scale of human action. Man should seek "not only the human good but also the good of things extra human, that is, to extend the recognition of 'ends in themselves' beyond the sphere of man and make the human good include the care of them" (Jonas, H. 1984, pp. 7-8.).

Jonas argues that an imperative of responsibility might run like this, "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life," Or, expressed negatively, "Act so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life" (Jonas, H. 1984, p. 11).

Prospective responsibility is never formal but always substantive. We feel responsible, not in the first place for our conduct and its consequences but for the matter that has or will have a claim on our acting. The well-being, the interest, the fate of others has, by circumstance or by agreement, come to our care, which means that our control over it involves at the same time our obligation for it. (Jonas, H. 1984, p. 92. and p. 93.).

Jonas suggests differentiating between *natural* responsibility on the one hand and *contractual* responsibility on the other: "It is the distinction between natural responsibility, where the immanent 'ought-to-be' of the object claims its agent a priori and quite unilaterally, and contracted or appointed responsibility, which is conditional a posteriori upon the fact and the terms of the relationship actually entered into" (Jonas, H. 1984, p. 95.).

Our Obligations to Future Generations

We have natural responsibility toward future generations because our actions and policies affect their possibility of life without being consulted. In today's business and public policy the usual way of dealing with future generations is the application of the well-know method of *discounting*. Decision-makers usually over-value things here and now in comparison with things far and later. This phenomenon is called of discounting. The main regularities of discounting in space and time can be studied in the following decision problems.

(I) Choose between making a gain G here and now and making the same gain G far and later (For example, to gain USD 10,000 here and now or to gain USD 10,000 far and later). The majority of decision-makers prefer the first alternative against the second one. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" - people discount gains that are distant in space and time.

Now let us study the inverse situation.

(II) Choose between making a loss L here and now and making the same loss L far and later (For example to lose USD 10,000 here and now or to lose USD 10,000 far and later).

The majority of decision-makers prefer the second alternative against the first one. People put off negative things till the morrow because they discount losses that are distant in space and time.

The next decision problem is the combination of (I) and (II).

(III) Choose between making a gain G here and now and, at the same time, a loss L far and later and making a loss L here and now and, at the same time, a gain G far and later (For example, to gain USD 10,000 here and now and to lose USD 10,000 far and later or to lose USD 10,000 here and now and to gain USD 10,000 far and later).

The majority of decision-makers prefer the first pair of alternatives against the second pair of alternatives because they undervalue both gains and losses that are distant in space and time.

Decision-makers use special discount rates to value things distant in space and time. The present value of a thing is calculated as follows:

$$(IV) \quad T = t / (1 + \alpha)^x$$

where T is the present value of the thing t , x is a measure of the distance of t in space or in time, and α is the discount rate that is usually between 2% and 5 %.

If the distance of a thing in space or/and in time is great enough then its present value becomes extremely small. Also, the present value depends on the applied discount rate: greater the discount rate, smaller the present value. The present value of a thing is determined by the applied discount rate and its distance in space and time.

Discounting in space and time may produce negative consequences in corporate and governmental decision making. Decision-makers, who strongly discount things in space and time, are interested neither in the solution of long range ecological and human problems, nor in the global impacts of their activities on the natural environment and human communities.

The international trade in hazardous wastes is an illustrative case in point. American and West-European countries transport and dump hazardous wastes in distant and less-developed Third World countries, and do not display any interest in the future ecological human health impacts of these materials.

Discounting the future impacts of present generations is ethically indefensible because it renders extremely low weight to the interest of future generations. If the discount rate is high and/or the time period is long then the value of future impacts becomes close to zero. (Aldred, J. 2009)

We should consider every generation as equal and should not presuppose anything about the preferences of future generations.

Edith Brown Weiss developed three principles which underline our obligations to future generations. (Brown-Weiss, E. 1989):

(1) Each generation should be required to conserve the diversity of the natural and cultural resource base, so that it does not unduly restrict the options available to future generations in solving their problems.

(2) Each generation should be required to maintain the quality of the planet so that it is passed on in no worse condition than the present generation received it.

(3) Each generation should provide access to the legacy from past generations to future generations.

Accounting for Future Generations

The Stiglitz & Sen & Fitoussi Report on *The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* presents an advanced view on *sustainability*, that is, the possibility of permanence of present activities. (Stiglitz, J., A. Sen & J-P. Fitoussi 2009, pp. 61-62)

The report says that sustainability poses the challenge of determining whether we can hope to see the current level of well-being at least maintained for future periods or future generations, or whether the most likely scenario is that it will decline. The idea is the following: the well-being of future generations compared to ours will depend on what resources we pass on to them. Many different forms of resource are involved here. Future well-being will depend upon the magnitude of the stocks of exhaustible resources that we leave to the next generations. It will depend also on how well we maintain the quantity and quality of all the other renewable natural resources that are necessary for life. From a more economic point of view, it will also depend upon how much physical capital – machines and buildings – we pass on, and how much we devote to the constitution of the human capital of future generations, essentially through expenditure on education and research. And it also depends upon the quality of the institutions that we transmit to them, which is still another form of “capital” that is crucial for maintaining a properly functioning human society.

The question is how can we measure whether enough of these assets will be left or accumulated for future generations? In other words, when can we say that we are currently living above our means?

The report suggests that in order to measure sustainability we need indicators that inform us about the change in the quantities of the different factors that matter for future well-being. Put differently, sustainability requires the simultaneous preservation or increase in several “stocks”: quantities and qualities of natural resources, and of human, social and physical capital. (Stiglitz, J., A. Sen & J-P. Fitoussi 2009, p.17.)

We agree with the view that what really count for the well-being of future generations is the quantities and qualities of different stocks or capitals. However, we think we should

define "*sustainability thresholds*" for these stocks or capitals against which we can evaluate the current state of affairs. (Zsolnai, L. et al 2009)

If the state of a certain stock or capital is below its defined sustainability threshold then it indicates that the present generations pose burdens on future generations in this field. Similarly, if the state of a certain stock or capital is above its defined sustainability threshold then it indicates that the present generations give gifts to future generations in this field. Being identical with the defined sustainability threshold means that the impacts of the present generations are neither negative nor positive for future generations in the given field.

In our model the state of ecological capital, financial capital, human capital and intellectual capital together determine the fate of future generations. Better the states of these capitals, better the prospects of future generations and vice versa.

We developed key indicators for measuring the performance of present generations for future generations. (Table 1)

Table 1 *Future Generations Indicators*

Capital	Indicator	Value Range	Required Value
Ecological	ecological footprint	0,1–12 ha per capita	< 1,6 ha per capita
Financial	debt service per capital formation	0 – 1,2	< 0,5
Human	share of youths per inactive adults	0,1 – 1,1	> 0,5
Intellectual	investment in research and development	0 – 0,04 of GDP	>0,02 of GDP

Values of the above indicators for selected European countries are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 *The Performance of European Countries for Future Generations in 2005*

	Ecological capital (%)	Financial capital (%)	Human capital (%)	Intellectual capital (%)
Austria	-335	n/a	-187	+86
Belgium	-346	n/a	-155	-105
Bulgaria	-183	-155	-183	-392
Cyprus	-428	n/a	-154	-541
Czech Republic	-361	+36	-201	-156
Denmark	-541	n/a	-174	+76
Estonia	-430	+92	-195	-220
Finland	-353	n/a	-175	+58
France	-332	n/a	-152	+93
Germany	-284	n/a	-202	+80
Great-Brittan	-359	n/a	-173	-106
Greece	-394	n/a	-187	-345
Holland	-295	n/a	-171	-127
Hungary	-239	-181	-161	-227
Italy	-320	n/a	-174	-175
Ireland	-287	n/a	-148	-165
Poland	-267	-118	-168	-345
Latvia	-235	-115	-204	-476
Lithuania	-215	+81	-168	-263
Luxemburg	-810	n/a	-149	-110
Malta	-322	n/a	-142	-690
Portugal	-299	n/a	-198	-256
Romania	-193	+62	-172	-500
Spain	-386	n/a	-197	-180
Sweden	-343	n/a	-186	+53
Slovakia	-221	+88	-177	-377

On Table 2 figures show the performance of the given countries measured against the required value for future generations in % terms. Minus values indicate that present generations are indebted to future generations while plus values indicate that present generations produced surplus for future generations.

From the data several observations can be derived. There is no country in Europe which would not present some burden for future generations in one or more domain. There are some countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Latvia) which present burdens in all domains for future generations. There are other countries (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Romania, Slovakia, Lithuania) which present gifts for future generations in financial or intellectual domains but at the same time present serious ecological and/or human burden for them. The sad fact is that the *fate of future generations* are *not assured* in Europe at all.

Caring for future generations is not an altruistic concern only. Improving the position of future generations enhances the future of the present generations too. There is a future for Europe if and only if the prospects of future generations improve throughout Europe.

References

Aldred, J. 2009: *The Skeptical Economist. Revealing the Ethics Inside Economics*. Earthscan. London and Sterling, VA.

Brown-Weis, E. 1989: *In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony, and Intergeneration Equity*. The United Nations University, Tokyo & Transnational Publishers, Inc. Dobbs Ferry, New York.

Jonas, H. 1984: *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press.

Jonas, H. 1996: "Toward an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future" in Hans Jonas: *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good After Auschwitz*. Northwestern University Press. Evanston, Illinois. pp. 99-112.

Stiglitz, J., A. Sen & J-P. Fitoussi 2009: *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr

Zsolnai, L. et al 2009: *The Fate of Future Generations in Hungary*. Business Ethics Center, Corvinus University of Budapest. (unpublished paper)
