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Responsibility for future generations

Future generations are not yet born human beings. Practically we can imagine future generations as people who may live in the next 150-200 years. Activities of present generations affect the fate of future generations for the better or for the worse. What we do with our natural and cultural heritage mainly determine the way future generations may live their own life.

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)

In his opus magnum "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age" Jonas' basic preoccupation is with the *impact of modern technology* on the human condition. (Jonas, H. 1984). (Figure 1)

The major theses on which Jonas' theory of responsibility is based are as follows:

- (I) “The altered, always enlarged nature of human action, with the magnitude and novelty of its works and their impact on man’s global future.”
- (ii) “Responsibility is a correlate of power and must be commensurate with the latter’s scope and that of its exercise.”
- (iii) “An imaginative ‘heuristics of fear’, replacing the former projections of hope, must tell us what is possibly at stake and what we must beware of.”

(iv) “Metaphysics must underpin ethics. Hence, a speculative attempt is made at such an underpinning of man’s duties toward himself, his distant posterity, and the plenitude of life under his dominion.”

(v) “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.).

According to Jonas 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.).

For Jonas an imperative responding to the new type of human action 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).

Jonas states that the necessary conditions of moral responsibility are as follows: “The first and most general condition of responsibility is causal power, that is, that acting makes an impact on the world; the second, that such acting is under the agent’s control; and the third, that he can foresee its consequences to some extent” (Jonas, H. 1984: p.

90.).

Jonas underlines the fact that 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 differentiates 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.).

The parent and the statesman are presented as ideal types of natural responsibility and contractual responsibility, respectively. Concerning their responsibility, the roles of parent and statesman have much in common. These common features are totality, continuity, and future-orientation: Responsibilities encompass the total being of their object. The pure being as such, and then the best being of the child, is what parental care is about. The statesman’s responsibility, for duration of his office or his power, is for the total life of community, the “public weal.” Neither parental nor governmental care can allow itself a vacation or pause, for the life of the object continues without intermission, making its demands anew, time after time. More important still is the continuity of the cared-for existence itself as a concern. It is the future with which responsibility for a life, be it individual or communal, is concerned beyond its immediate present. An agent’s concrete moral responsibility at the time of action does extend further than to its proximate effects (Jonas, H. 1984: p. 102., p.105. and p.107.).

Jonas summarizes the imperative of responsibility as follows: “The concept of responsibility implies that of an ought - first of an ought-to-be of something, then of an ought-to-do of someone in response to the first.” This is most evident in the case of a *newborn baby* “whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely, to take care of him.” Not only the newborn calls us in this way, but so

does “the unconditional end-in-itself of everything alive and the still-have-to-come of the faculties for securing this end” (Jonas, H. 1984: p. 130. and p. 134.).

Our obligations to future generations

We have natural responsibility toward future generations. 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. Fitussi 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.

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