



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Partridge, Ernest, "The Future - For Better or Worse."
Environmental Values 11, no. 1, (2002): 75-85.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5847>

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The Future – For Better or Worse

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ABSTRACT

Alan Carter correctly argues that Thomas Schwartz's 'future persons paradox' applies with equal force to utilitarianism, rights theory and Aristotelian ethics. His criticism of Rawls's 'justice between generations' is less successful, because of his failure (and perhaps Rawls's as well) to fully appreciate the hypothetical nature of the 'original position'. Carter's attempt to refute Schwartz's argument by focusing on the individuality of moral action fails, since it evades the essential point of Schwartz's argument. The best response to Schwartz is to concede the essential validity of his argument and then to turn that argument into an *ad absurdum* refutation of his central premise, 'the person affecting principle'.

KEY WORDS

Future persons, future generations, posterity, person affecting principle, Alan Carter, Thomas Schwartz

I.

As Alan Carter fully recognises in his article 'Can We Harm Future People?' (Carter 2001), Thomas Schwartz has presented environmental ethicists with a provocative challenge. Put simply, Schwartz claims that any effective attempt to improve the life prospects of remotely future generations will cause different individuals to exist in that future than would have existed had no such attempts been made in the present (I shall call this 'the disappearing beneficiaries premise' or DB). Accordingly, the life prospects of particular individuals in that future can in no way be altered by policies adopted in the present. Such policies can only cause different remote persons to come into existence. And since present policies can thus neither improve or damage the quality of remotely future lives, those future persons can not correctly be said to be either benefited or harmed by our

policies – in a word, they will have no cause either to praise or blame us for our provision for the future. For were we to do otherwise, they simply would not exist. Essential to this argument is the ‘person affecting principle’ (PAP), which Carter, in concurrence with Schwartz, expresses thus: ‘harming [or benefiting] a person is to make that person worse [or better] off than he or she otherwise would have been’ (Carter 2001: 446: my alterations).

Because Carter has given us an excellent summary of Schwartz’s argument, I will not repeat that task here, except to point out that, if anything, both Carter and Schwartz may have understated the radical contingency of the genetic identity of future individuals.

Philosophers who deal with ‘the right to life’ and other issues regarding future persons often make the distinction between ‘merely possible persons’ (those who could but eventually will not come into existence) and ‘possible and eventual persons’ (those who will come into existence). In this regard, further questions are raised as to whether mere-potential persons have a ‘right to be born’ and whether they are ‘benefited’ by coming into existence or ‘harmed’ by being denied existence. More often than not, it is insufficiently appreciated that this first class (‘merely possibles’) has virtually infinite members.

This circumstance follows from well-known facts about human reproduction. A healthy male ejaculates some two-hundred million spermatozoa, any one of which could produce upon fertilisation of the ovum, a genetically distinct individual. As Carter correctly points out, which gamete heads the queue is a matter of timing, posture and innumerable other accidental factors – plain ‘dumb luck’. Multiply this with the behaviour of a billion or so sexually active males, and it becomes clear that at any moment in time a myriad of ‘possible futures’ come into and out of existence. Extend that ‘moment in time’ over weeks, months or years, and you have your ‘infinite’ of ‘merely possibles’.

Thus, for example, when the terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center (two and half weeks ago at this writing), the entire world community within the range of modern communications (perhaps 90% of the global population) soon became aware of this catastrophe, and their behaviour was altered, profoundly in some cases and very slightly in others. At that moment, all of the ‘would-have-been’ posterity vanished and a new set of ‘possibles’ took its place, surely to be supplanted over and over again as time moves forward.

The point of this recitation is that we do not and probably never will have the capacity to choose the genetic endowment of our posterity, either proximate or remote.¹ Nor can we predict the cultural circumstances of future generations. Accordingly, the identity of future individuals will be, as it always has been, a complete mystery and, as Schwartz correctly points out, the members of that class will change with every effective attempt to alter the future. It follows that we can only deal with ‘future generations’ as a class, identifiable in terms of significant general human characteristics, and not as an aggregate of individually unique individuals.

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II.

Carter's paper begins with an entirely successful demonstration that Schwartz's argument (hereafter, following Gregory Kavka, 'The Future Persons Paradox', or FPP) applies with equal effect to utilitarianism, Aristotelian perfectionism, rights theory and John Rawls's 'justice as fairness'. Next we encounter Carter's carefully crafted attempt to indicate that some acts by present individuals may favourably affect the future without causing a total 'repopulation' of that future. I will argue that this tactic fails, since it evades rather than answers Schwartz's challenge. Near the end of his essay, Carter suggests a paradigm case which, if carefully explored, may deal a devastating blow to Schwartz's argument. This essay will close with a sketch of what I have found to be the most effective response to the Future Persons Paradox.

Utilitarianism, rights theory, Aristotelian ethics, and Rawls's 'Justice as Fairness' all endorse acts and policies that will benefit, or forbear from harming, remotely future generations. They differ in how they define 'benefit' – variously as happiness, preference satisfaction, respect for rights, self-fulfilment, justice, etc. Accordingly, because the Future Persons Paradox generally refers to unspecified 'benefits' and 'harms', all these moral theories are equally vulnerable to the Paradox – to the argument that by attempting to 'improve the future', no particular individuals will be benefited or harmed.² Thus far, I am in full agreement with Carter.

III.

Carter proceeds next to a meticulous argument with the aim of demonstrating that particular individuals in the present *might*, as individuals, act to provide benefits or prevent harms to *some* future persons without, through such attempts, causing different persons to eventually exist (thus, according to Schwartz, benefiting no one). Thus, he argues, Schwartz's claim that attempts to 'benefit the future' in fact benefit no individuals applies to *collective* action, but not necessarily to individual action.³

I find three difficulties with this argument: (a) Carter's exception to Schwartz's challenge has application only to the degree that such individual acts are insignificant and proximate; (b) such individual acts are directed to the end of implementing the collective policies which Carter concedes fall under Schwartz's principles; and, most seriously, (c) Carter's 'exceptions' are stipulated by Schwartz to be outside the scope of his argument.

(a) Carter contends that not every act of each individual in the present will determine the existence of all future persons. Therefore, there are present individual acts which will affect for better or worse the lives of specific future

persons who will exist regardless of whether these present actions take place. If so, Carter claims, then these particular future persons can meaningfully be said to be *affected* (harmed or benefited) by these present acts, Schwartz to the contrary notwithstanding.

If this is a correct statement of Carter's contention, then I must affirm that it is obviously true – for the near future and for insignificant personal acts. What an obscure Kansas farm hand may or may not do today surely will have no effect whatever on a particular farmer in Papua or for his descendants a few generations hence – including no effect on the genetic identity of these individuals. For a while, at least, these two procreative lines remain independent. Similarly, my small donation to the Sierra Club or my letter to my Senator will not affect the procreative outcomes of most couples in my generation or even the next. But that fact resides precisely in the insignificance of my personal actions. However, if the 'personal act' in question is the deciding vote by my Senator in favour of the Kyoto treaty, then the full force of Schwartz's argument obtains, as that 'individual act' results, within Schwartz's hypothetical six generations, in an entirely different population coming into existence.⁴

(b) Furthermore, the very point of my donation to the Sierra Club and my letter to my Senator is to provoke that very 'collective' action which, Carter concedes, has the result that Schwartz postulates (Carter 2001: 442). I would not send that donation or that letter unless I believed that either might, in some small way, bring about a policy that would 'benefit' future generations. Yet Schwartz asserts, and Carter concurs, that such a policy (*ergo* a 'collective action'), if enacted, would produce a population of individuals, a few generations hence, that would not have existed had that 'collective action' not taken place – individuals who therefore cannot be affected and thus not be harmed by our failure to adopt the policy, or benefited by our adoption thereof.

(c) Most significantly, Carter's hypothetical 'non-contingent' individuals in the present or near future, who are benefited by my individual acts (i.e., who would exist whether or not I so acted), are simply outside the scope of Schwartz's theory and thus in no way refute it. About such non-contingent individuals, Schwartz might say to me, with full justification, 'well good for you – you have behaved commendably, and it is a fine thing that you have *favourably affected* other lives. *But that is simply not the topic of my argument!*' Then he might continue, 'my thesis is that acts and policies (either by individuals or collectives) which successfully intend to alter the future will, in approximately six generations, result in different (i.e. "contingent") individuals living in that future – individuals, *qua* different, whose lives can not be affected by what we intend and implement in the present generation. I will freely concede that there might be "non-contingent" individuals in the near future who come about despite insignificant acts by individuals, but these individuals are explicitly outside the scope of my (Schwartzian) argument'.

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IV.

Late in his paper Carter suggests, with his ‘toxic waste paradigm’, an argument with devastating implications for Schwartz and the Future Persons Paradox. He writes:

... within a single future generation, two people might suffer equally as a result of some action which we had performed – as in our having buried toxic waste which later spilled from its container – but only one of the two persons might be harmed [i.e., in the ‘person-affecting’ sense – EP]; namely, the one whose existence was not dependent upon our having buried the container. (Carter 2001: 447, see also 443–4)

The force of this paradigm resides in its apparent dissolution of the moral significance of the distinction between ‘contingent’ and ‘non-contingent’ individuals. I am so impressed with these implications, that I would like to reformulate and expand the paradigm.

Imagine two ten-year old boys, James and John. They were born hundreds of miles apart, at which time the parents of James had no acquaintance or association whatever with the parents of John. Ten years later, they are next-door neighbours.

Eleven years earlier, James’s father buried a container of toxic waste in his back yard, and the following night, James was conceived. At time-present, James and John are playing in the back yard, whereupon they uncover the container and are poisoned by the toxic waste, causing serious and permanent injury to both.

According to Schwartz’s analysis, James owes his very existence to that container. Had his father taken the waste to a legal disposal site, a genetically different child, ‘Jane’, would have been conceived. Accordingly, James was not made ‘worse off’ by his father’s negligence eleven years earlier, and thus has no cause for complaint. On the other hand, John’s conception was totally unrelated to and independent of that act. Thus, he does in fact have cause for complaint – he was made ‘worse off’ by the burial.

That conclusion is intuitively bizarre on its face, and one cannot imagine any legislature or subsequent court of law recognising a substantive difference in the moral or legal evaluation of the two cases, due to the ‘radical contingency’ of James’s conception. Both boys were injured due to the negligence of James’s father, though James would not have existed otherwise – another child, ‘Jane’, would have been born. But a distinction between two different lives – that of a healthy Jane and a seriously and permanently injured James – can not be regarded as morally indifferent.

In rebuttal, Schwartz might counter that his argument applies, not to the contemporary generation or its immediate successors, but to remote generations (at least six generations hence), wherein *all* individuals will be genetically different from what they would have been had we acted differently in time-

present. Even if we grant this stipulation, the case of James and John retains its force against the Future Persons Paradox. The alleged fact that significant present acts and policies completely ‘repopulate’ the remote future with different individuals, in no way gainsays the moral principle that if, somehow, there *were* remotely future individuals who would exist in both alternative futures (i.e., ‘non-contingents’), these individuals would be equally ‘harmed’ as the ‘contingent’ individuals by our irresponsible acts. This consideration obtains even if Schwartz is entirely and irrefutably correct about the ‘repopulation’ of the remote future, following the enactment of significant policies in the present.

It gets worse. Consider next this puzzle: suppose a young father, following the birth of his child Jane, sets up a fund for the college education of all his children. Subsequently, another child, Joan, is born. According to Schwartz’s hypothesis, had the father failed to set up that account he would have harmed Jane but not Joan, for that foregone trip to the bank would have ‘reshuffled’ his genetic deck, thus causing a different child than Joan to be born. This consideration, however, does not apply to Jane whose birth took place before the father’s decision not to provide for both of the daughters. Accordingly, Jane would have had cause for complaint, but Joan would not.

It appears, then, that if it is wrong to harm someone by causing injury *to* that person, it is equally wrong to be responsible for the existence of a life that suffers injury, even if the cause of that injury to the latter person is a *sine qua non* of that person’s existence. The moral intuitions evoked by the ‘toxic waste’ and ‘college fund’ cases lead us strongly to that conclusion. What is lacking is an argument to support those intuitions. In the remaining sections, I shall offer such an argument.

V.

In analysing the Future Persons Paradox, the foremost thing to keep in mind is that it is *a paradox*. The argument appears sound: the premises all seem to be plausible and the logic is valid. Those premises and that logical structure yield an intuitively unsettling conclusion: ‘we have no obligation to any of our distant descendants to adopt *P*’ (i.e., a policy to restrict population, conserve natural resources, preserve the environment, etc.) (Schwartz 1978: 10–11).

One is faced with three alternatives: (a) Demonstrate the invalidity of the logical structure; (b) Reject at least one of the premises; or (c) Accept Schwartz’s conclusion.

My critique utilises two of these alternatives. First of all, while I concede the formal validity of Schwartz’s argument, I shall then point out that the conclusion stated above, which validly follows from his premises, is not the conclusion that he asks us to accept, and this altered and expanded conclusion does *not* follow from the formal argument. Secondly, I shall argue that an essential premise to his

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argument, ‘the person affecting principle’, will not support his expanded conclusion.⁵

The extended conclusion

The conclusion of Schwartz’s formal argument is ‘we have no obligation to any of our distant descendants to adopt [policy] *P*’ (I shall call this C-1). However, this is not the thesis that he presents at the very beginning of his paper. There he states that ‘we have no obligation extending indefinitely or even terribly far into the future to provide any widespread, continuing benefits to our descendants’ (C-2; Schwartz, 3). Implicit in that assertion and further on in Schwartz’s paper is a bolder claim: ‘We have no moral obligations to improve the living conditions of persons who will live in the remote future’ (C-3). The formal conclusion (C-1) validly follows from the Person Affecting Principle; namely, that a harm or benefit to an individual entails an affect upon that individual.⁶ The extended conclusions (C-2 and especially C-3) can only follow from a stronger formulation of the PAP, which Schwartz neither articulates nor defends: ‘*only* acts which affect or can reasonably be expected to affect (i.e. benefit or harm) the ongoing lives of particular individuals can count as morally significant’.

Formulation and implementation of environmental policy is not confined by that ‘*strong* person affecting principle’. On the contrary, the improvement of individual future lives is not the business of environmental policy: rather, that business is to improve the prospects of those who will live in the future (a moral obligation rejected by Schwartz in his third conclusion, C-3). In other words, environmental policy-makers are choosing among *different populations with varying life prospects for those populations*. Moreover, these are *forced* decisions. Absent cosmic catastrophes (e.g., an asteroid collision) and ultimate human folly (e.g., a nuclear war), there will be future generations. Because of the aforementioned radical indeterminacy of future populations (containing a finite number of the infinitude of unrealised ‘possibles’), we are today in no position to identify and to select among the individuals who will live in the future. Instead, we have a forced choice of better or worse living conditions for whomever may live in the future – which, as Schwartz correctly points out, amounts to a choice between better and worse, albeit different, human lives. And these remain morally significant decisions, even though they are not decisions that will alter the quality of eventual individual lives.

*The Founding Father’s Argument*⁷

The force of our critique of the ‘strong’ Person affecting Principle might be better appreciated if we shift the time perspective from that of a predecessor generation (e.g., our own) ‘looking ahead’ to its successors, to that of a successor generation (again, our own) ‘looking back’ to its predecessors.

In 1789, a convention was called in Philadelphia to draft a constitution for the United States of America, in the words of the Preamble of that document, ‘for ourselves and our posterity’. At that convention, the delegates adopted a Bill of Rights but failed to abolish slavery.

By Schwartz’s account, I should not be grateful for the Bill of Rights, for I was not personally ‘made better-off’ by that document. But neither should I nor any AfroAmericans regret the continuation of slavery for had the founders chosen otherwise, none of us would exist today.⁸ (Nor would any of us exist today if a countless number of intervening events been otherwise, up to the micro-behaviour of our parents the night of our conceptions). Yet historians today generally agree that the founders are to be praised for adopting the Bill of Rights, and blamed for not abolishing slavery.

There is no inconsistency here. The founders did not draft the Constitution for the personal benefit of Partridge, or George Bush, or Al Gore, or for any of six billion present inhabitants of the Earth who would not exist today had there been no Convention in 1789. They adopted the Constitution for the benefit of future generations, as a class, regardless of what particular individuals (among the infinitude of ‘possibles’) might eventually come into existence, or for that matter be *caused* to come into existence, in this and all other subsequent generations. They did so because they had no other option. They could not anticipate much less determine, the personal identity of future individuals, and so were left with the forced choice among discriminably alternative futures for whomsoever might eventually come into existence. They chose a future which, to the best of their knowledge and political skill, would best achieve the objectives of the Preamble: ‘... to establish Justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity’.

It is outlandish, I submit, to suggest that because this effort by the founding fathers did not affect the individual lives of remotely future persons, the ratification of the Constitution was of no moral significance.

VI.

To summarise: the Future Persons Paradox is an *argumentum ad absurdum*. Assume the premises – ‘disappearing beneficiaries’ and ‘the person affecting principle’ – and Schwartz’s conclusion follows: ‘we have no obligation to any of our distant descendants to adopt *P*’ (i.e., a policy to restrict population, conserve natural resources, preserve the environment, etc.). If we concede the validity of the argument (as we have) and yet find the conclusion to be morally reprehensible, our only recourse is to reject at least one of the premises. Because the phenomenon of ‘the disappearing beneficiaries’ appears to be empirically secure, ‘the person affecting principle’ must be rejected.⁹ This is the preferred

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solution of Derek Parfit, Gregory Kavka, this author, and most (but not all) philosophers who have responded to the Future Persons Paradox. Thomas Schwartz is among the minority who have embraced the PAP, and with it the repugnant conclusions.

Alan Carter chooses to accept both premises and yet rejects Schwartz's conclusion, which must mean that he finds the logical inference to that conclusion to be invalid. Unfortunately, we have found no convincing demonstration of this invalidity and so must conclude that his refutation of Schwartz and the Future Persons Paradox has failed.

I reject the Person Affecting Principle, and with it Schwartz's repugnant conclusions, not because that principle is, strictly speaking, *false*, but because it is *incomplete* as a moral principle. That is to say, (a) while it is entirely correct that it is morally praiseworthy to favourably affect ('benefit') an actual individual life and morally blameworthy to unfavourably affect ('harm') that life, (b) such 'person-affects' do not exhaust the domain of morally significant acts. (Thus I concur with Schwartz and Carter regarding (a) and dissent regarding (b)). Beyond the scope of the Person Affecting Principle are those occasions when it is in principle totally impossible to deal with identifiable individual lives, and yet one is faced with a forced choice between hypothetical populations with variable and discernable degrees of value in their lives.¹⁰

Such an occasion is precisely that which was faced by the founders of the American republic at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as they were drafting a political charter 'for ourselves and our posterity'. It is likewise the occasion faced today by the American Congress along with the governments of all industrialised states, as they face the informed consequences of their environmental policies upon future generations.

NOTES

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¹ I am aware that some futurists claim that someday biotechnology might allow us to select the genetic code of our prospective children. Even if we grant this much, that determination will apply only to one generation and its progeny. That generation will be unable to predict the genetic choices of subsequent generations. Thus the indeterminacy of remote generations remains.

² Despite this neat generalisation, I am tempted, as the author of a book-length dissertation, 'Rawls and the Duty to Posterity', to expound on Carter's analysis of Rawls's approach to this topic (Partridge, 1976). However, I will resist this temptation. Let this note suffice as a reply. Both Carter and Rawls fail to appreciate the full implications of Rawls's description of the 'persons in the original position'. Due to the veil of ignorance,

these ‘persons’ are neither persons nor a plurality. Absent any distinguishing personal qualities of the ‘parties’, the original position collapses to a more familiar concept of ‘the moral point of view’, though Rawls’s book is no less magnificent for that fact. That ‘collapse’ also abolishes the distinction between Rawls’s ‘*single generational*’, the Routley’s ‘*omintemporal*’ or Hare’s ‘*atemporal*’ interpretations (Routley and Routley, 1978; Hare, 1973). So we are left with our previous point: Rawls’s account of ‘justice between generations’ proposes to improve the life prospects of remotely future generations. Accordingly, the challenge of the Future Persons Paradox to Rawls’s theory of justice is undiminished.

³ ‘The mistaken Schwartzian view that [present-day] Andrea, Ben and Clara cannot possibly harm [future persons] Xerksis, Yolanda and Zak, depends upon regarding Andrea, Ben and Clara as, in effect, a collective entity. When they are viewed in such a manner, then it appears that *they* cannot harm Xerksis, Yolanda and Zak. But when Andrea, Ben and Clara are considered individually, it is clear that *they* can harm them’ (Carter 2001: 442).

⁴ Schwartz offers a mathematical proof of his claim that a complete ‘repopulation’ takes place in six generations (Schwartz 1978, 6).

⁵ For an expanded version of these arguments, see my ‘Should we Seek a Better Future’, (Partridge 1998, 86–9).

⁶ Schwartz states the PAP negatively as the third premise of his argument: ‘Were A not to do something, and were B not significantly affected thereby, then B would not lack any significant benefit he would have enjoyed (or could reasonably be expected to have enjoyed) had A done that thing’ (Schwartz 1978: 11).

⁷ This argument is presented with further elaboration, including an employment of the concept of ‘the moral point of view’, in my ‘Should We Seek a Better Future?’ (Partridge 1998: 86–9).

⁸ In personal correspondence to me (which I am therefore not free to identify), a defender of the FPP (born after 1945) writes: ‘I should indeed be “grateful” to Hitler for starting WWII ... using “grateful”, as I believe you are, in a figurative way. Still, we’d have to be stunningly altruistic to regret any of Hitler’s significant actions’.

⁹ At least the ‘strong PAP’ as explicated above: ‘*only* acts which affect or can reasonably be expected to affect (i.e. benefit or harm) the ongoing lives of particular individuals can count as morally significant’.

¹⁰ Here I am deliberately avoiding adherence to one or another moral theory. That ‘value of lives’ is open to various interpretations – as *happiness* or *preference satisfaction* (utilitarianism), *rights*, *self-realisation* (Aristotle), or *justice as fairness* (Rawls).

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