FINITE LIVES AND INFINITE ENDS:
An Account of Imperfect Obligations to Future Generations

Dana Falkenberg

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Approved by:
Thomas E. Hill, Jr.
Douglas MacLean
Susan Wolf
ABSTRACT

DANA FALKENBERG: Finite Lives and Infinite Ends: An Account of our (Imperfect) Obligations to Future Generations
(Under the direction of Thomas E. Hill, Jr.)

Rights-based accounts of obligations to future generations suffer from a number of theoretical difficulties, most notably the non-identity problem. A more fruitful way of understanding these obligations (if, indeed, there are any) is through the notion of imperfect obligations. Imperfect obligations are actions that are owed to others even when those others lack a corresponding right to demand those actions of us. One way of establishing that we do indeed have obligations of this nature to future generations can be illustrated by the incoherence of willing a principle of indifference toward future generations. Because we are finite rather than self-sufficient beings, we must rely on the cooperation of future generations in order to have our current projects succeed.
To Skyler and Gopher: you fill my home with love and kisses, respectively.
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It is easy to unreflectively take obligations to future generations for granted. It seems that surely we are obligated to make some small sacrifices of our well-being for the sake of future people. It seems obviously wrong for us to allow toxic chemicals to leach out of a landfill and poison people’s groundwater, even if this will not occur for another hundred and fifty years, and those who will be affected by our action have not yet been born. Yet it can be difficult to account for the wrongness of such actions. We usually want to say that such actions are wrong because of the harm that is done to people. But, we must then be able to offer an account of who is harmed and how she is made worse off.

One strategy is to assert that such actions violate the rights of future generations, rights that give current generations a corresponding obligation to respect those rights. If we truly owe it to future generations to promote their good, then they must have a right to our aid, a right that they can claim against us.\(^1\) However, rights-based accounts of obligations are not well-suited for taking future generations into account. It seems uncontroversial enough to assert that once future generations are born, they will have rights that correspond with their interests and that they will be people who must be taken into account morally. What is less clear is whether such future people can be said to have rights now, and that we have obligations toward them on account of these rights.

Another way of approaching the problem posed by future generations is to deny

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that future generations have rights or interests, and then conclude that we have no
obligations toward future generations. Perhaps we still care about future generations,
but this is simply a matter of sympathy, an extension of the concern we have for our own
children and grandchildren and not something that can be demanded of us morally.

The general dichotomy that goes on in discussions of our obligations to future
generations (if, indeed, we have any) – that between justice and rights, and between what
is nice but is in no way owed -- is unsatisfying. Surely it would be wrong for us to
destroy our environment and make the world uninhabitable – even if we cannot pinpoint
exactly who is wronged in this scenario, who it is who has a right against us, or whose
interests have been ignored or neglected. Surely it would be wrong to squander resources
that may be desperately needed by those who come to exist after we are long gone, even
if conservation would have caused different people to exist, and so those who do exist are
not made worse off by our actions.

It seems that what is needed is an account of obligations to future generations that
avoids the pitfalls of rights-based accounts of such obligations and yet is able to insist
that concern for future generations is morally required, that actions expressive of such a
concern can be morally demanded of us. The concept of imperfect obligations seems to
be a concept well-suited to the case of future generations. First, I will illustrate exactly
which difficulties an account of obligations to future generations must face, and reveal
the shortcomings of accounts that rely on a notion of rights. Then I will show how
understanding our obligations to future generations as imperfect obligations seems to
avoid these difficulties and also yield fruitful results. Finally, I will argue that the

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2See, for example, Thomas Schwartz’s “Obligations to Posterity” in Obligations to Future Generations,
grounds for such obligations can be established on a Kantian framework. A principle of indifference toward future generations cannot consistently be willed on account of ends that non self-sufficient (or finite) agents cannot rationally renounce. A principle of moral indifference to future generations will involve a fundamental misunderstanding of the sort of finite beings we are, and what is involved when such a limited being wills an end.

In order to see why imperfect obligations are a convenient concept in the case of our obligations to future generations we must first illustrate some of the problems with which an account of obligations—particularly rights-based accounts—to future generations must grapple. As Rawls famously put it, “There is no need to stress the difficulties that this problem raises. It subjects any theory to severe if not impossible tests”\(^3\). Ethical theories of a modern liberal bent, in which rights and contractual relations often play a central role, face the following problems in particular. First, simply the temporal location of future people appears to be worrisome. Two of the common ways for liberal theories to ground a source of community out of which our moral and social rights and obligations arise, are explicit contracts and reciprocal relations. But, the temporal location of future generations creates problems for both of these accounts.\(^4\) Obviously, we cannot make explicit contracts with people who may, but currently do not, exist. Furthermore, reciprocity depends on social arrangements in which all members recognize the benefits that accrue to them on account of their participation in the system. Because of the benefits that they receive from cooperation, they acknowledge that they also have an obligation to share in the burdens of the cooperative scheme. But, it is

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\(^4\) These criticisms are succinctly stated by Golding in his “Obligations to Future Generations”. 

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argued that we cannot engage in reciprocal relations with future generations. The actions of future generations are said to be unable to help or harm us, as we will long be dead and invulnerable by the time they are active agents. The only relation available is radically vulnerability on the part of future generations, and the inability to be harmed on behalf of the existing generation. There can be no interests on our part that are served by future generations that can be appealed to in order to establish an obligation. Theories that base the source of moral or social obligation in these relations, while simultaneously excluding altruistic impulses as a fundamental source of social obligation such as Rawls’, seem to necessarily exclude future generations from consideration. If such obligations have grounds, then explicit contracts and relations of reciprocity seem to be misguided.

If appeals to advantageous cooperative social arrangements cannot easily ground obligations to future generations, perhaps the next place to look would be our more altruistic impulses: sympathy for the vulnerability of future generations, a fellow feeling that is a more abstract form of the love that we have for our more immediate posterity – our children and grandchildren. We might then say that our sympathy gives us reason to promote the good of future persons and to help them achieve their ends. But future people are not capable, now, of setting their own ends. There are no ends that they have set that we can help them to achieve. Must we then set ends for them? This causes two separate concerns. First we face a problem of paternalism. If future generations do have rights, then acting for the sake of future generations can risk forcing our conception of the good onto them, which would then violate their rights. Secondly, desiring the good for another

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5 For a summary of such arguments, and an account of how future generations can properly be said to help or harm us, and not simply our reputations, see John O’Neill’s “Future Generations: Present Harms” in *Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 263 January, 1993, pp. 35-51.
person presupposes that we have a particular good in mind for that particular person. This problem is nicely phrased by Martin Golding. “My desire for another’s good must in this event be more than impulsive, and presupposes, rather that I have a conception of his good. This conception, which cannot be a bare concept of what is incidentally a good but which is rather a conception of the good for him, further involves that he not be a mere blank to me but that he is characterized or described in some way in my consciousness.”

In order to promote the good of future generations, we must be able to discern what the goods for the individuals of the future will be. In addition to the moral problem of paternalism, we risk misguided conception of the good of the people in (distant) future generations which could result in a lowering of future welfare. Our sacrifices made on behalf of future generations can be wasteful efforts on or part, or even harmful to future generations.

Thirdly, if we can be said to have obligations toward future generations, to whom do we owe these obligations? Famously, Derek Parfit’s non-identity problem has shown that person-affecting principles, principles that account for morality of an action in terms of whether people are made better or worse by the action, do not apply in the case of future generations. If what we do determines not only the conditions in which future people live, but also which people are born it can be impossible to argue that a policy or action has made these people better or worse off. The alternative for those made worse off by the policy is not exist. “It is in fact true of everyone that, if he had not been conceived within a month of the time when he was in fact conceived, he would never have existed. Because this is true, we can easily affect the identities of future people, or who the people are who will later live. If a choice between two social policies will affect

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6Golding, p. 66.
the standard of living or the quality of life for about a century, it will affect the details of all the lives that, in our community, are later lived. As a result, some of those who later live will owe their existence to our choice of one of these two policies. After one or two centuries, this will be true of everyone in our community”.7

Because of the contingency of the identities of future people, if there is something wrong with pursuing a long-term policy, such as overpopulating the world and depleting limited by necessary natural resources, or releasing chemicals into the atmosphere that will have widespread, deleterious effects on human health, what cannot be wrong with it is that it makes worse off the specific individuals that it does. In order for them not to be “harmed” or made worse off by these policies, a different policy would have been carried out, which would then have affected exactly which individuals were born – other people would then be less miserable. Person-affecting principles rely on our actions making the same people better or worse off, then, cannot be used to account for obligations to future generations.

Unfortunately, most convincing accounts of rights rely on person-affecting principles.8 It is difficult to give an intelligible account of rights without appeal to the harms and interests of individual people. Rights and justice are primarily concerned with our treatment of other people, and what one must do in order to avoid harming or wronging another. When we violate another’s rights, we have harmed her, or sacrificed her interests in an objectionable manner. But, if we are dealing with long-reaching policies that will affect not only the conditions in which people live, but also which


people will be born, just as we cannot say that a future person was made worse off by a particular policy, we also cannot meaningfully claim that her rights were violated. The alternative is simply for her not to exist.

Nonetheless, there is something compelling in accounts of obligations to future generations that make appeal to their rights. The concept of rights, of inescapable obligation, seems appropriate when confronting questions of such importance as the continuation of human life. Appealing to the rights of individuals is often very effective in forcing us to expand our moral community, to make it inclusive of those who are initially deemed alien or lower when this otherness was not based on a morally relevant distinction. By gaining membership in the community “the full force of my obligation to him will be manifest to me quite independently of any fellow-feeling that might or might not be aroused. The involuntary character of the obligation will be clear to me, as it probably never is in the case of individuals who command one’s sympathy”. Rights are also a source of empowerment. Rights may serve to ground the self-esteem and sense of self-worth that allows individuals to demand respect, even if not love, from others. “The rhetoric of rights disputes established powers and their categories and seeks to empower the powerless; it is the rhetoric of those who lack power and do not accept the status quo. Those who claim their rights deny that the powers that may be may define who they are, what they may do, or what they are entitled to”.

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9For similar points see Golding’s “Obligations to Future Generations”. For a similar argument in regard to the rights of children see Onora O’Neill’s “Children’s Rights and Children’s Lives” in Ethics, Vol. 98, No. 3, April, 1988, pp. 445-463..

10Golding. p. 68.

can appeal to the concept of rights to empower them and enable them to make claims for recognition and respect that is owed to them by an exclusory community.

However, talk of claims and rights and empowerment does not easily apply to future generations, and may obscure rather than reveal the sorts of moral relationships that do exist. It may be the case that rights talk will mobilize the current generation to take steps to secure the rights of future generations through institutions, but this is a rhetorical and political advantage that is distinct from moral theory. In theory, the rights of future generations are on the whole clunky and inappropriate and serve to obfuscate rather than ground the ties that future generations have with our current moral community. Rights are instruments used by the downtrodden of society to get recognition from those who have the power to grant them the goods of society. But there is no good parallel when it comes to future generations. Instead, we are the ones with the power. We must ask ourselves if there is anything that is owed rather than insist that it is owed. From a practical and a theoretical standpoint, then it seems we have grounds to look for a non rights-based account of obligations.

It appears that imperfect duties are one way of establishing obligations to future generations that steers clear of the major problems that accounts of obligations to futures may face. If there is an identifiable class of obligations that do not necessarily rely on the rights that individuals can claim, then it seems an obvious contender for the sort of obligation one might have to people who don’t currently exist. They are simply things we ought to do, rather than actions that are owed to identifiable others at an identifiable point in time. We don’t need to make sense of how there can be valid claims that cannot
be claimed because their claimants do not exist. We do not owe it to a specific individual to make her life better than it would otherwise be, but we do have a general obligation to care about, and take actions to promote, the well-being of others.

Mill and Kant are two historical figures who made use of the theoretical space for imperfect obligations and duties.\(^{12}\) Kant’s account of our imperfect obligations and duties will be my primary concern. However, it is useful to frame Kant’s somewhat fragmented discussion of imperfect duties – and how they relate to perfect, juridical, ethical, wide, and narrow duties – in light of Mill’s straightforward and succinct account. Mill is abundantly clear that such duties do not correspond to rights. But while there is no right at issue, such actions are not merely meritorious gifts to be bestowed on the downtrodden. To neglect such considerations or principles would be a moral wrong.

Obligations, according to Mill are what people are bound to do. “It is part of the notion of duty in every one of its forms that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfill it. Duty is a thing which may be \textit{exacted} from a person, as one exacts a debt. …. There are other things, on the contrary, which we wish that people should do, which we like or admire them for doing, perhaps dislike or despise them for not doing, but yet admit that they are not bound to do; it is not a case of moral obligation.”\(^{13}\)

But while these are types of actions that we are bound to do, they are not all actions that are clearly \textit{owed to} other specific individuals. Because of this, such duties are outside the sphere of justice and rights. In order to classify an act as unjust, we need

\(^{12}\)While technically our general obligations are what ground our specific duties, for the sake of simplicity in this paper I will refer to them as roughly equivalents.

\(^{13}\)Mill, \textit{Utilitarianism}, p. 49.
to be able to point to 1.) a wrong done, and 2.) an identifiable person who is wronged.\textsuperscript{14} There must be something that was owed that was denied, and a specific person to whom it was denied. Our obligations that do not depend on what is owed by one person to another are instead obligations of beneficence. “Now it is known that ethical writers divide moral duties into two classes, denoted by the ill-chosen expressions, duties of perfect and of imperfect obligation; the latter being those in which, though the act is obligatory, the particular occasions of performing it are left to our choice, as in the case of charity or beneficence, which we are indeed bound to practice but not toward any definite person, nor at any prescribed time. In the more precise language of philosophic jurists, duties of perfect obligation are those duties in virtue of which a correlative right resides in some person or persons; duties of imperfect obligation are those moral obligations which do not give birth to any right. I think it will be found that this distinction exactly coincides with that which exists between justice and other obligations of morality.”\textsuperscript{15}

Unlike Mill where juridical and ethical duties clearly are distinguished by the matter of rights, and clearly align with our perfect and imperfect duties, the distinction between obligations that depend on the rights of another, and other forms of obligation that do not depend on rights is less precise in Kant.\textsuperscript{16} Duties of right are largely external duties. External duties are those that are concerned with our actions rather than the

\textsuperscript{14}Mill, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{15}Mill, p. 49-50.

\textsuperscript{16}This discussion owes much to Marcia Baron’s "Kantian Ethics and the Supererogatory" in \textit{Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology}, and Thomas Hill’s "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation" in \textit{Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant’s Moral Theory}. There are a large range of interpretive issues on these matters. For the sake of simplicity, I will restrict the exegetical discussion.
grounds from which we act, or the ends that we are required by morality to embrace. External duties are those that we can be compelled by others to fulfill. Actions can be compelled of us, but no external force can ever compel us to accept an end – such a constraint can only come from within. Duties of right and our external duties are largely concerned with our treatment of others, specifically with our duty not to harm others, to infringe on their rights.\textsuperscript{17} Because duties of rights are largely a matter of our relations with others, specifically our external relations or actions, juridical duties can be rightfully compelled of us; they involve a corresponding right of another to use compulsion. They are aligned with our perfect duties, our duties that admit of no exceptions.

Duties of virtue, or ethical duties, are concerned with our ends rather than our external actions and are related to our imperfect duties.\textsuperscript{18} Our imperfect duties command us to embrace certain objectively necessary ends (the ends that are also our duties: one’s own moral perfection and the happiness of others) and are less directly concerned with our external treatment of others. “No external lawgiving can bring about someone’s setting an end for himself (because this is an internal act of the mind), although it may prescribe external actions that lead to an end without the subject making it his end”\textsuperscript{19}. That our ethical duties are less a matter of treatment of others, and more closely aligned with improving ourselves and the world in which we live, is a bit easier to notice when we consider that the two ends that are also duties quite obviously correspond with Kant’s conception of the Highest Good – perfect morality conjoined with perfect happiness. In

\textsuperscript{17}For the basic distinction between duties of right and duties of virtue see The Metaphysics of Morals 6:238-240.

\textsuperscript{18}See The Metaphysics of Morals 6:380, 6:390, and 6:381.

\textsuperscript{19}The Metaphysics of Morals 6:239.
an important sense, these are duties to make ourselves and the world a certain way, rather than duties that mandate or prohibit certain kinds of actions or treatment of one another that could be externally enforced. “[I]n the case of wide imperfect duties, ethics gives laws only for maxims, and provides only very indirectly and with great latitude and indication as to what actions one is to perform” 20

Because such duties to not require that we perform specific actions towards specific people, imperfect duties allow a degree of latitude in when, and how to perform the sorts of actions that must follow when we embrace certain ends; “the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty” (MM 6:390). Imperfect duties can then be narrow or wide, meaning that they may be less (narrow) or more (wide) flexible in how or in which ways we are required to fulfill them. 21 Both narrow and wide imperfect duties allow us greater room than perfect duties to decide whether a given principle is relevant in a particular situation, and freedom to choose among different ways of satisfying the principle. However, wide imperfect duties also allow us to choose whether or not do perform an action in circumstances specified by the principle, as long as we are generally willing to perform such actions. For instance, embracing a principle of beneficence will make me willing to help our neighbors. However, I do not have to help my neighbors every time the opportunity presents itself. It is okay on occasion to sit and enjoy a book on a Saturday afternoon, when I could be outside helping them rake their leaves. This is not the case with our narrow imperfect duties – there is never a time when it is morally permissible to show a lack of respect for myself, for instance.

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20 Baron, p. 31.

21 This closely follows Hill, p. 155 and Baron, p. 30.
The accounts of imperfect duties offered by Mill and Kant reveal how imperfect duties may have the potential to avoid some of the major problems that confront rights-based accounts of our obligations to future generations. Perhaps most importantly, they are flexible in who they are owed to. The beneficiaries of our acts of charity and beneficence, whoever it is who is on the receiving end of our action are largely a matter of chance. If we have a principle of beneficence, we should be willing to help those that we happen to encounter simply because they need it and not because it is owed to them as a matter of right. The idea is that we must work to promote the welfare of others, and not that we owe it to individuals to make them better off. In the case of future generations, we have a duty to avoid building our toxic-leaking landfill not because we owe it to individuals in the future, but because we have a duty to embrace whatever actions will promote human happiness or welfare even if these actions may require some effort or sacrifice on our part. Imperfect duties also allow for flexibility in how much is morally required while still maintaining that they are morally required. This may help us make sense of how future generations can count without the needs of future generations overwhelming the needs of those currently living. We have a duty to promote human welfare, but not to maximize it at the cost of the rights of those currently living.

It is also important that for both Mill and Kant, it is not simply meritorious to fulfill these duties, but a matter of moral obligation – we are culpable if we fail to fulfill these duties. While, our imperfect duties may allow for a degree of flexibility in how and when we fulfill them, it is never the case that it is morally permissible to wholeheartedly neglect developing one’s own talents or promoting the happiness of

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others. In Kant’s terminology, they are ends that we are morally required to embrace and actively promote. It does not simply reveal a lack of merit or virtue in neglecting to fulfill these duties, but it is a matter of culpability for which the sanctions of society, or at least one’s own conscience, is appropriate.

Lastly, particularly in Kant, there is a sense of that these duties have as their focus a respect for certain ends, a respect for certain things (one’s own moral improvement and the happiness of others) that can be brought about in the world. These are the sorts of moral considerations that seem most applicable in the case of obligations to future generations, rather than prescribing specific courses of action in order to avoid violating another’s right. Embracing certain ends prompts us to play a role in bringing our world into closer alignment with an ideal world for finite agents such as ourselves, a world where perfect virtue meets with perfect happiness.

It seems that if we have duties to future generations, we have good reasons to classify them as imperfect duties. But how are we to establish that they are indeed duties? The most obvious way of doing this is to stick closely to Kant’s line of argument. According to the first formulation of the categorical imperative, if obligations to future generations are imperfect duties, a principle of indifference to future generations would have to involve a contradiction in the will rather than a contradiction in conception. In order for us to have a contradiction in the will, we must first formulate a maxim -- a description of what we will do, in which circumstances in order to achieve our end. They

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It is important to note that this is simply one method of establishing obligations to future generations on Kantian grounds. There may be an equally promising way to establish such an obligation through the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which requires us to treat humanity as an end, never merely as a means, but for the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the first formulation.
are principles of the form: I will do x in circumstances y for the sake of z; the point is for us to express our conception of what we are doing and why. The first formulation of the categorical imperative is what is used in order to test the permissibility of one’s maxim. Contradiction in conception involves a maxim the universalization of which cannot even be thought without contradiction. Famously, the deceitful promiser defeats her own purpose. If everyone were to make a false promise in order to receive a loan, then those lending the money will not believe the promise of repayment, and then they would not lend the money. Such a principle cannot be universally willed because it would be self-defeating.

Contradictions of the will are one of the more puzzling and easily misunderstood aspects of Kant’s ethics. One of the most elucidating accounts, and the most relevant for understanding exactly how such arguments can establish obligations to future generations, is offered by Barbara Herman in “Mutual Aid and Respect for Persons”. On first glance, Herman argues, contradictions of willing are often taken to be arguments that appeal largely to our self-interest in a way that is antithetical to Kant’s theory. The contradiction in will that is involved with the man who is willing to forgo the help of others in order to not have to help them, is that such a man may come to need help in the future and want to be aided. But, if this principle had been universalized, he would be his own source of his inability to get help; “he would be willing both that the world be such

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24 For background on some of the interpretive issues regarding the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, see Thomas Hill’s “Kantian Normative Ethics”, David Copp, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 480-514 and Richard Galvin’s “The Universal Law Formulas” in The Blackwell Guide to Kant’s Ethics (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), pp. 52-82. I focus on Herman’s account for the sake of simplicity, but it does not appear to me that my argument rests on anything peculiar to her interpretation. Indeed, it seems that my argument could work even if the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative did rely solely on prudential reasoning, as will be obvious below.
that no one could help anyone and that he be helped." The problem with this reading is that it appears that such a man can give up either his general policy of not helping anyone, or give up his end of wanting help. He could adopt “the attitude toward needed help that it is a tolerably unfulfilled desire.”

Herman argues that it is not simply prudential reasoning that dictates that the man cannot give up his end of wanting help. If this were the case the man could just as easily calculate the likelihood of his needing help, and decide whether it is reasonable to take a chance. Instead, the problem involved with a principle of non beneficence is that for any end, it is not possible for an agent to guarantee in advance that he can pursue his end successfully without the help of others. This is enough to bring about “a contradiction in will (supposing one has already willed a law of universal nonbeneficence) if either of the following conditions hold: 1.) that there are ends that the agent wants to realize more than he could hope to benefit from nonbeneficence and that he cannot bring about unaided or 2.) that there are ends that it is not possible for any rational agent to forgo (ends that are in some sense necessary ends).”

Herman views the procedure of the Categorical Imperative as “being designed to draw our attention to those features of our condition – as rational agents in this world and as members of a community of persons – that serve as the conditions of our willings.”

In the case of willing, willing the end entails that we will the necessary means for that end (or give up the end, if it is not a necessary end). The things we can use as means are


26Herman, p. 48.

27Herman, p. 52.

28Ibid.
ourselves, things, and other people. The question is why can’t the strong man give up any end that he discovers would require the help of others? First, the strong man may be tempted to abandon the end of living without the help of others, so he must commit himself to resisting such temptation. To be committed to that resistance entails that one is committed to the means that are necessary in order to resist. However, it may be the case where circumstances will arise where the only available means to resist the temptation will be other people. “If he rejects the possibility of help here, he will no longer be able to guarantee that he will abandon any end that he discovers cannot pursue without help.”29 Part of what this contradiction reveals is that, “It is a fact of our nature as rational beings that we cannot guarantee that we shall always be capable of realizing our ends unaided.”30 Thus, a policy of being indifferent to the needs of others cannot be willed because of our status as dependent, finite beings. It reveals both our duty to help others and it defines a community of mutual aid for such finite beings. Our membership in the community is established by our vulnerability, and our rationality – the capacity to help others.31 What is problematic in a contradiction of the will is not that the agent does what is ultimately not in her interests, but fundamentally misunderstands the sort of being that she is.

Herman also briefly points out that it may be possible that future generations have a claim of mutual aid, despite their being unable to help us – they qualify as the types of beings capable of giving aid, even if they cannot in fact give aid.32 But there are much

29Herman, p. 54.
30Herman, p. 55.
31Herman, P. 60.
stronger reasons for including future generations in a community of mutual aid than Herman considers, reasons that also draw on what it means for finite agents to will ends. Importantly, Herman is mistaken in her assumption that future generations are not capable of giving aid to currently living generations.

Let us take it that Herman’s line of interpretation regarding mutual aid is roughly correct\(^ {33}\) and assume that we are members of a community of mutual aid and that membership of the community does not extend to future generations. In other words, let us assume that we have obligations to aid those who are members of the current generation, but no obligation to aid those of future generations. We would then have to be able to universally will as our principle something along the following form. “I will be a fully functioning member of the current community of mutual aid. I will do my best to help others so long as they are members of the currently living generation. But, I will not take into account future generations, those who do not currently exist. I will not go out of my way to make them worse off, but I will also not take actions to promote their welfare. I shall be indifferent to it.” It may initially look as though such a principle can be consistently willed. After all, I am not depriving myself of any aid that I could ever possibly need (being a member of the current generation). I am also not depriving anyone around of aid. If future generations could not help or harm us, there could be no hope for an inconsistency in adopting a principle of indifference, of renouncing their aid.

\(^{32}\)Herman, p. 62.

\(^{33}\)Again, this is for the sake of simplicity. It does not appear to me that there is anything in my argument that rests on anything that is peculiar to Herman’s reading.
However, there are good reasons to reconsider whether it truly is the case that future generations cannot aid us in achieving our ends.\textsuperscript{34} Consider as an example Jim the Researcher. Jim dedicates his entire life to what he believed was a promising form of medical research in which he was able to manipulate the growth of new blood vessels. Jim is convinced that a restriction of growth of new blood cells will provide a cost-effective and life-saving new form of cancer treatment. Jim’s colleagues are less convinced. His last research grant was denied, and all of his publications on the subject have been rejected. But Jim is determined. He uses all of his personal funds (mortgages the house, sells his cars) and starts up his own research company in order to perfect his technique. Then he dies. His lab is sold off to pay for his outstanding debts, and his papers are auctioned off to a local museum where they are archived. There they sit until one day a group of scientists decide to reevaluate his work. There are then two things that could happen. Either they could see that Jim was onto something, or they could re-confirm their suspicion that Jim was just a crazy, deluded old man. But importantly, whichever they do will either help or harm Jim – they will determine whether his life was a success or a failure, whether he achieved his end of curing cancer. As John O’Neill has argued, future generations can play an important role in determining whether our projects are successes or failures; they can vindicate our work or confirm it to have been a waste of our time; whether or not our projects are brought to fruition will often be determined by future generations.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34}For similar arguments of a non-Kantian variety, see John O’Neill’s “Present Harms” (which also includes a lovely, detailed example) and Douglas MacLean’s “A Moral Requirement for Energy Policies”.
\textsuperscript{35}O’Neill, p. 41.
What this also reveals is the way in which we care about the objective realization of many of our ends. Jim probably knew that his work would not make a difference in his lifetime, and yet he kept working because he found the end itself to be valuable – a cure for cancer. Many of the ends that rational agents set clearly seem to belong to this variety, notably the well-being of our friends and families (even if we are unaware of it). We will some of our ends because we find them objectively valuable. But if the willing of an end involves a concern for the realization of that end in the world, then end-setting is not a subjectivist matter. We care about the objective realization of our ends. Insisting that future generations cannot help or harm us relies on a subjectivist, hedonistic account of what it means to harm – that harm is reducible to a particular mental state, and because mental states stop when we die, there can be no possibility of harm. But this fails to capture many of the goals and ends of our lives. It seems that part of what it means to will these sorts of ends entails that we care deeply about them being realized even if it occurs after our death. And some of our ends are long-ranging enough where this is a real possibility; the success or failure of our projects and ends will then depend on the efforts of future generations. Future generations, then, can also play a pivotal role in helping us to achieve our ends.

But if future generations can have a role to play in helping us achieve our ends, then it does not seem that we can rationally exclude them from our moral considerations, unless we are willing and rationally able to give ends that we would wish to be realized even after our deaths. But there are a number of reasons why we could not rationally do this. First, as finite beings, we have little control over when we die. It will be difficult

36 See O’Neill, p. 45, and MacLean, p. 137.
for us to make sure that we do not have any unachieved ends of a personal nature that we would not will for future generations, or our more immediate successors to carry out. Secondly, according to Kant we also have ends that are demanded by reason – our ends that are also duties – our own perfection and the happiness of others. These are ends that are rationally required out of a respect for the humanity in ourselves and others. Among other things, a respect for humanity is a respect for the human ability to set our own ends, to be self-determined.\textsuperscript{37} We must work to develop our talents – to fail to do so would be to fail to respect the humanity in our own person. We must work to promote the happiness of others, because a respect for humanity in their person, a humanity that makes them capable of setting all sorts of ends – requires me to embrace at least some of their ends.\textsuperscript{38} A respect for humanity in ourselves and others, a respect for our ability to set and achieve all sorts of ends, requires us not merely to respect the rights of humanity, it does not merely prohibit certain forms of treatment of others, but it also requires us to promote the conditions in which ends can be realized.

By rejecting a principle of indifference toward future generations, we must then be willing to take on a positive duty of aid. Future generations are part of our community of mutual aid – they are necessary to bring to fruition our ends, ends that we either want to realize more than we hope to gain by a principle of unconcern for future generations, or ends that we simply can not give up as rational agents.

\textsuperscript{37}What exactly is required by a respect for humanity, and what exactly is in humanity that is so worthy of respect is a highly contentious issue that is well worth side-stepping for the sake of this paper. For an excellent summary of the various interpretations, see Richard Dean’s \textit{The Value of Humanity in Kant’s Moral Theory}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). All that is required for my purposes is the idea that there is something about our ability to choose that it would be irrational for us to give up.

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{The Metaphysics of Morals} 6: 379-386.
It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the more specific duties that our general obligation to future generations would specify. To do so would require an involved discussion of the scope and latitude of our imperfect duties. But, it does seem that some tentative suggestions are in order. Because our duties to future generations are similar to our obligations of mutual aid, they could be interpreted as an imperfect duty that is fairly demanding. The scope of mutual aid requires that we need a morally relevant reason why we may not help. It seems appropriate to think of our duties to future generations on these grounds: when evaluating two policies, one of which will involve appreciably greater welfare for those people who happen to be living than the other, then we need a morally relevant reason why we should not choose the first policy – it may be necessary that it violate the rights of those currently existing, or infringe on their welfare in a similar or worse manner. Furthermore, because some of our ends extend indefinitely, and willing an end entails that we will the conditions that are necessary to achieve this end, it appears that many of our duties to future generations would involve a concern for the conditions in which our ends, and ends in general, can be realized. Such conditions would include what is generally thought to be owed to future generations – the conservation and protection of resources essential to life, a preservation of knowledge, art and history. We would have to protect and promote what are essential means for life, and the know-how needed in order to use them.

We should perhaps not be surprised that a plausible account of the irrationality of indifference toward future generations is fairly easy to come by. As was noted, our imperfect duties in Kant are related to bringing about the sort of world that is perfectly
suited to our finite rational natures. This is a world that may never come about, but the possibility of which must be postulated in order to provide meaning to many of our actions – our actions are contributing to something we cannot help but wish for, and that is tied up with both the rationality of our conduct and a loving acceptance of our sensuous natures. It gives our lives meaning, sense and purpose in order to see ourselves as contributing to a tangible good even if we may not live to see it.
REFERENCES


MacLean, Douglas, “Environmental Ethics and Future Generations”, forthcoming in
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