Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligations to Future Generations?

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Can public officials correctly be said to have obligations to future generations? Issues of intergenerational fairness are all around us. Beginning with the Athenian oath, H. George Frederickson reviews moral, philosophical, and empirical arguments about the obligations of public officials toward future generations. A review of philosophers, both ancient and contemporary, finds general agreement that temporal generations have moral responsibilities toward both their children (near-term future generations) and posterity (future generations through time). Using the compound theory of social equity, the author finds many examples of intergenerational equity in making and implementing of public policy. Finally, he calls for a moral community in public administration that practices both temporal and intergenerational social equity.

Consider the oath taken by citizens of the Athenian city-state:

> We will ever strive for the ideals and sacred things of the city, both alone and with many; we will unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public duty; we will revere and obey the city's laws; we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

With this oath, citizens accepted the responsibility to conduct effectively the temporal affairs of the city. They also pledged to pass the city on to the next generation in better condition than they received it. The Athenian public service ethic called for *more* than equality between the generations.[1] My purpose in this article is to consider issues of intergenerational equality and to ask the question: can public officials correctly be said to have obligations to future generations?

It seems that issues of intergenerational fairness are all around us. The current debate over the national deficit rings with charges that the debt was incurred by a profligate generation to be paid for by their children and their children's children (Aaron, Bosworth, and Burtless, 1989). This debate is aside from the issue of which groups—lower, middle, or upper classes—benefitted most from the run-away federal borrowing of the 1980s. Proposed solutions turn entirely on the question of who will pay if much of the deficit is not passed on to coming generations (Kotikoff, 1991). The health care finance issue is also mostly about fairness and equity between the insured and uninsured in present generations; the old and those not yet old; the medical and pharmaceutical professions; and the insurance companies. It is claimed with considerable evidence, that unless health care costs are contained the deficit cannot be reduced. Much of the essential thrust of the environmental movement is to preserve the earth's resources for coming generations. The Social Security system is by definition intergenerational. These are but a few of the more visible policy issues that have mostly to do with questions of fairness and equity both between groups in present generations and between present and future generations.[2]

The economic growth of the last half of the 20th century, particularly in the United States, seemed to indicate that successive generations do better. Based on this experience it appeared that successive generations have always done better. In fact, in the longer sweep of history intergenerational well-being has never been linear. Changes in human conditions such as nutrition, education, employment, and housing have been cyclical (Neustadt and May, 1986; Smith, 1988; Schlesinger, 1986; Kennedy, 1993; Strauss and Howe, 1991).

It is now clear that the generation born from the mid-1960s through the 1970s will likely do less well than their parents at least in terms of comparative income. Indeed, in a recent review of social science research on generational differences it was concluded that the next generation will do worse psychologically, socially and economically than its parents (Whitehead, 1993). Projections are that the differences between generations will widen as the baby-boom generation retires and the children born in the late 1970s and the 1980s start to enter the work force.

There is no doubt that elected officials are now especially sensitive to intergenerational issues. This sensitivity is particularly evident in political rhetoric and symbols. Do public officials, including public administrators, in fact, have definable responsibilities to future generations?[3] If so, what are these responsibilities? Are there theories or ethics in public administration that inform our thinking about future generations? Can there be social equity between generations?

I deal with these questions, first, with a consideration of the philosophical and ideological perspectives on intergenerational equity; then with a presentation of the compound theory of social equity as a tool for working with intergenerational issues; and finally, with an application of the compound theory of social equity to intergenerational questions of fairness and equity.

Future Generations as a Domain of Equity: Philosophical Perspectives

The possible domains of equality are endless. One thinks immediately of equal justice before the law, some level of equality in education, equality in voting, equal access to job opportunities, and other generally accepted domains of equality. I will not treat here as domains specific fields of public policy (environment, education, health care) or spheres of individual or group interests. This section is limited to a treatment of the future or future generations as a broad and generalized domain. I ask: Can future generations be regarded as a domain, or part of a domain, of equality? How is this question answered philosophically and normatively?

Classical considerations of morality and ethics often include a consideration of future generations. In Plato's "eros" (desire, striving, life as an Idea) the passion is a personal commitment to one's work, to a work that transcends the present for the uncertain future, for sacrifice not just to present others but to the remote (Hartmann, 1981). The strength in the Platonic eros is the ethos of love, not just of one's neighbor, but of the one who is to be, a love which cannot be returned. Aristotle asserted that men and women unite out of a "natural striving to leave behind another that is like oneself (Politics, p. 1252 a30). Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, as a set of principles that defines the general condition of human life, does not presuppose temporal limitations. From this ethical perspective, time is irrelevant in moral philosophy (Rawls, 1971). If justice or equality are imperative principles of conduct in one place and at one time, they are imperative in another place and at another time. Edmund Burke accounts for a cross-generational community bound together by moral contracts. John Locke describes a state of nature in which we are moral equals, equally entitled to use the earth and its resources. In this condition, an individual may fairly possess land for his or her own use provided that the land is used rather than wasted and that he or she "leaves enough and as good for others" (Locke, 1965, p. 333). David Hume, while critical of Locke's contractarian notions, shares his view of future generations. In his account of the virtues, we are "plac'd in a kind of middle station betwixt the past and the future" and "imagine

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our ancestors to be, in a manner, mounted above us, and our posterity to lie below us" (Hume, 1968, p. 306; Baier, 1981).

Certainly these philosophers regard future generations to be in some general sense deserving of intergenerational justice, equity, and fairness. They describe philosophically based domains of claims on the part of present generations toward future generations. But their considerations of morality and ethics were mostly temporal, with only very general conceptions of ethics between generations. It has been left to contemporary thinkers to fill in the details. One might wonder why considerations of intergenerational morality are much better developed in our time than they were in the past. I speculate that it has to do with the present issue of abortion, particularly in the United States, and with a wide range of contemporary environmental (natural resource depletion; endangered species; air, earth, and water pollution) and technology (particularly nuclear energy and genetic engineering) issues.

In modern moral philosophy and ethics, John Rawls (1971) is the leading advocate for including future generations in the domain of justice. His is a broadly based domain of claims. Following social contract theory, Rawls develops a principle of justice as fairness, in which "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for all" (p. 250), and a difference principle, in which "social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the less advantaged members of society" (pp. 15-16). Choices in Rawlsian justice as fairness are made behind a veil of ignorance from which one does not know one's circumstances and cannot, therefore, make self-advantaging preferences. This part of Rawlsian justice as fairness has been the dominant subject in philosophy and ethics for the past 20 years. Rawls' concept of intergenerational equity is less well known and has seldom received consideration in the ethics literature.

When the above concepts are applied to the problem of justice between generations, Rawls holds that once the difference principle is accepted

> The appropriate expectation in applying the difference principle is that of the long-term prospects of the least favored extending over future generations. Each generation must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilization, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but it must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of real capital accumulation (Rawls, 1971, p. 285).

This is the "just savings principle," a capital accumulation in one generation for the next, and so forth.

The criteria for justice between generations, following Rawls, are those that would be chosen from behind the veil of ignorance and in the original position. The parties do not know to which generation they belong, whether they are relatively wealthy or poor, whether their generation is wealthy or poor, agricultural or industrialized (Rawls, 1971, p. 278). Behind this veil of ignorance, people would (should) chose the principle of justice as fairness and the difference principle to guide their moral and ethical judgments both in temporal and intergenerational circumstances. Using Rawls words,

> We can now see that persons in different generations have duties and obligations to one another just as contemporaries do. The present generation cannot do as it pleases but is bound by the principles that would be chosen in the original position to define justice between persons at different moments in time. In addition, men have a natural duty to uphold and to further just institutions and for this the improvement of civilization up to a certain level is required. The derivation of these duties and obligations may seem at first a somewhat farfetched application of the contract doctrine. Nevertheless these requirements would be acknowledged in the original position, and so the conception of justice as fairness covers these matters without any change in its basic idea (Rawls, 1971, p. 293).

Rawls presents the most consistent and nuanced claim for an ethic of intergenerational fairness, although it is abstract and difficult to apply.[4]

Many other contemporary theorists regard future generations as an appropriate domain for issues of equity, justice, and fairness, but they usually do so from a less demanding contractarian perspective than Rawls does. There is, for example, the argument that future generations are members of *our* moral community (Golding, 1981). As members of the extended moral community, we have obligations at the least to do no damage to the potential interests of future generations. We can do this better in the near term because our obligations are clearer. We are, according to Golding, probably too ignorant to plan effectively for remote future generations. Callahan (1981) is more convinced of our obligations. He sets out four principles that catalog our obligations to future generations: (1) We should do nothing to jeopardize their very existence; (2) We should do nothing to jeopardize their fundamental rights to a life of human dignity; (3) We should do this in such a way as to minimize jeopardy to the present generation; and (4) We should use our moral commitment to our own children as the guide for intergenerational fairness. A host of other modern thinkers (Jonas, 1981; Goodpaster, 1979; Green, 1981; Hartshorne, 1981; Kavka, 1981; Pletcher, 1981; Dalattre, 1972; Baier, 1981; McKerlie, 1989; Partridge, 1981), often for different reasons, agree that future generations are an appropriate domain for issues of morality such as equity. Their language is often different. Some speak of possible future persons (Baier, 1981), some speak of potential persons (Warren, 1981), some speak of being and nonbeing (Hardin, 1980). All agree that there is a legitimate domain of morality between present and future generations.

Perhaps the most interesting arguments for intergenerational models of ethics are less philosophical and more empirical. We have strong evidence of a longstanding domain of allocation to future generations. Humans commonly display a concern for the future that is part of their moral psychology (Partridge, 1981). In this moral psychology, humans collectively establish moral institutions (governments, schools, foundations) and trusts (local, state, and national parks; animal and bird reserves; soil conservation programs; air, water, and land pollution controls) which serve as evidence of an instinct toward future generations. There are, Ernest Partridge argues, as many examples of the expression of positive moral instincts toward future generations on the part of present persons as there are examples of jeopardizing institutions or conditions for future generations. Thomas Sieger Derr makes a similar point in claiming that people have a kind of "moral instinct" which seems to tell them to take some responsibility for future generations (Derr, 1981). "We seem to be intuitively aware of the wrong in imposing the bad consequences of our acts on others without their acquiescence" (p. 40).

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James Q. Wilson (1993) reviews the research literature on child development and identifies the emergence of the moral sense in children. Two fundamental instincts in this moral sense are sympathy, a kind of natural caring sociability; and fairness, a concern for just treatment which transcends the maximization of individual interests. These natural characteristics are passed from generation to generation. Wilson points to recent Russian history for evidence:

> After 75 years of cruel tyranny during which every effort was made to destroy civil society to create the New Soviet Man, we learn that people kept civil society alive, if not well. The elemental building blocks of that society were not isolated individuals easily trained to embrace any doctrine or adopt any habit; they were families, friends and intimate groupings in which sentiments of sympathy, reciprocity, and fairness survived and struggled to shape behavior (Wilson, 1993, p. 9).

The irony is, of course, that state imposed temporal equality is part of the logic of communism.

The stronger empirical case is found in the simple logic of decision (or action) theory. Charles Hartshorne points out that "it takes time for decisions to have their effect (therefore) all obligations in principle concern the future. Indeed the entire rational significance of the present is in its contribution to the future good" (Hartshorne, 1981, p. 103). If a decision, however instinctive or calculated, is the predicate of an action, then the processes of decisions and actions are always inclined toward the future. The question is the extent of the future—the next minute? the next day? year? generation? or remote generations of possible people? Decision processes, by definition, cannot affect the past. We know that the cycle of decisions and actions is partly a process of informed predictions; as the future gets more distant our predictions are less well informed and our decisions and actions are less reliable. In addition, we are not only more confident in the short-term, we are more subject to pressure to serve short-term interests (Simon, 1960; Harmon and Mayer, 1986; Harmon 1989).

The contemporary challenge of intergenerational fairness appears to have taken most modern social scientists and policy analysts by surprise. On one hand contemporary social science research and policy analysis have been heavily influenced by the teleological philosophy of utilitarianism particularly associated with John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. In this tradition, decisions and actions are judged by their temporal consequences depending on the results to be maximized—security, happiness, pleasure, dignity. Presumably results can be judged on the basis of the utility of the individual, the family, the group, the neighborhood, the political jurisdiction, the nation-state or even the world. In fact much of the logic of the utilitarian perspective is individual, manifest these days by concepts such as empowerment and choice in politics, and techniques such as mathematical modeling in analysis. This work has been determinedly temporal. As yet the tools and logic of utilitarian analysis have not been effectively applied to issues of intergenerational equity or fairness.

On the other hand, most contemporary scholarship and philosophy associated with issues of generational fairness tends to be deontological, based on fundamental principles of right or wrong. Much of