Journal of Global Ethics

ISSN: 1744-9626 (Print) 1744-9634 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjge20

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To cite this article: Kevin Gary Behrens (2012) Moral obligations towards future generations in African thought, Journal of Global Ethics, 8:2-3, 179-191, DOI: 10.1080/17449626.2012.705786

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.705786

Journal of Global Ethics
Vol. 8, Nos. 2–3, August–December 2012, 179–191

Moral obligations towards future generations in African thought

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(*Received 30 December 2011; final version received 20 June 2012*)

Given the importance of being able to account for moral obligations towards future generations, especially in the light of the problem of global climate change, I argue that there are under-appreciated notions in African thought that are able to significantly contribute to the on-going discourse with respect to inter-generational moral obligations. I identify two related African notions, both springing from the prominent belief that ancestors who have died – but continue to have a presence – are entitled to respect, which upon secular refinement are promising in terms of grounding a claim that we do have moral obligations to future generations. These conceptions are that the environment is a communal resource, shared across generations, and that the present generation should express gratitude to its predecessors for preserving the environment on its behalf, by emulating its predecessors and preserving the environment for future generations. I argue that these two conceptions present plausible grounds for thinking that we have moral obligations to posterity, partly because they go some way towards overcoming some of the theoretical concerns generally associated with the notion of moral obligations towards unidentifiable, contingent future persons.

Keywords: moral obligation; future generations; African thought; climate change

Introduction

The prospect of the alarming possible consequences of inaction with respect to the problem of global climate change has caused philosophers to pay increasing attention to the question of what, if any, moral obligations we have towards future generations. A recent issue of the newsletter of the International Society for Environmental Ethics speaks of an 'astonishing growth of climate ethics and future ethics', pointing out that more than 40 academic works have been published dealing with climate change and responsibilities towards future generations since the previous issue of the newsletter (Grove-Fanning 2011, 2). The association between concerns about climate change and future ethics is fairly obvious, and the increasing sense of urgency about the need for global action to curtail anthropogenic global warming explains the dominance of these issues in recent environmental ethical discourse. It also, however, highlights the fact that many environmental problems in their very nature require moral agents to take account of longer term implications that cross generations – in some cases, many generations. From the earliest days of the environmentalist movement, it has been clear that concerns about pollution, the depletion of non-renewable resources, human population growth, and the loss of habitats and species are essentially concerns that will affect not just the current generation, but future people, too.

It is by no means obvious that moral obligations towards posterity should be limited to future generations of persons only. Indeed, a strong case can be made for taking future generations of all morally considerable entities into account. However, if we are unable to coherently account

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ISSN 1744-9626 print/ISSN 1744-9634 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.705786
http://www.tandfonline.com

for moral duties to future persons, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to do so for other entities. Furthermore, environmental pragmatists have already argued quite convincingly that a weakly anthropocentric value system, coupled with taking a long-term, inter-generational view, is probably enough to ensure the protection of the natural environment into the future. On these grounds, and for reasons of focus, I confine myself in this article to the question of obligations to future persons.

I defend the thesis that there are two related African notions,[1] both springing from the prominent belief that ancestors who have died – but continue to have a presence – are entitled to respect, that are promising in terms of grounding a claim that we do have moral obligations to future generations. The first of these notions is the traditional understanding that land is not something that can be individually owned. It belongs to the community, which comprises past, present, and future generations. Since the ancestors are the guardians of the community, they are also the guardians of the land. The land, broadly understood to mean the environment, is consequently not something we can treat in any way we choose. This entails a direct obligation to future persons, to preserve the environment, since the land is a resource that must be shared with others, including posterity. The second notion is a conception that entails an indirect moral obligation towards future people, based on an obligation to predecessors: that the living need to demonstrate gratitude to their ancestors by following their example and ensuring that their descendants also inherit an environment capable of providing for their basic needs. These two under-appreciated African conceptions, that the environment is a resource shared by the community as a whole and that gratitude to our predecessors obligates us to preserve the environment for posterity, have a promising contribution to make to the on-going discourse about moral obligations towards future generations, which should appeal to a global audience. Together they work to establish future generations as morally considerable, too.

Western philosophy and inter-generational moral obligation

In order to demonstrate that these under-theorised African conceptions have a valuable contribution to make to the issue of inter-generational moral obligation, I first need to briefly sketch how this issue has been dealt with in the dominant environmental ethical discourse of Western philosophy. Partridge (2003) points out that the notions of future generations and posterity are frequently used in journalism, political discourse, the popular media, and the literature, and that they are matters of great interest to the public (428). Notwithstanding this observation, he also highlights that, at the time he was writing, very little direct attention had been given by philosophers to moral obligations towards posterity. He also draws attention to the obvious association between concerns for the environment and future ethics. He rightly observes that it was the growing realisation, in the nascent environmentalist movement, that human ingenuity and dominance of nature implied that humanity had become capable of doing damage to the environment on a scale never before possible – damage that would be permanent in some instances, and have effects for many generations in others – that made it necessary for ethicists to begin to seriously address our moral responsibilities towards the future (Partridge 2003, 428–9). Indeed, no sound environmental ethic can now ignore the question of what (if anything) we owe to posterity.

Partridge also correctly points out that when we begin to seriously consider our obligations to future generations, it soon becomes apparent that it is not as simple a matter as just extending our moral duties towards contemporary persons to include those who will exist in the future. There are, in fact many theoretical problems that we encounter, some of which are as follows:

- Since future people do not actually yet exist, it is reasonable to ask in what sense we can be said to have obligations towards them.

- Exactly who will be born in the future is contingent upon choices made in the present. Thus, we cannot know who future persons will be.
- We are unable to know what the needs or interests of people will be in a changed future world, and therefore, do not know exactly how to make provision for them.
- Since future persons cannot reciprocate any good we do on their behalf, some wonder why we should regard them as objects of our moral obligation, at all.
- These factors combine to create a significant motivational problem, since it is difficult to convince people to make personal sacrifices on behalf of unidentifiable, contingent persons who might exist in the future, and who cannot directly hold us to account for our actions.
- Even if we do have moral obligations to future persons, can they be thought of as having corresponding rights?
- Is it at all coherent to conceive of rights for future persons who do not actually exist? (Partridge 2003, 429–32)

These theoretical concerns and related issues have been the subject of much philosophical enquiry in the last few decades, and continue to occupy the minds of many philosophers. I will not attempt to give a comprehensive account of the literature in the field, here. Rather, I will turn my attention to African thought in an effort to identify any pertinent African moral conceptions that have a bearing on some of these issues, and explore how they are able to contribute to the on-going discussion.

Moral obligations to future generations in African thought

When considering obligations to future generations in African thought, a key factor is the pervasive belief that the ancestors continue to exert an influence over the lives of their living descendants, guiding their behaviour, and even punishing and rewarding them. These beliefs still play an important role in African life, across all strata of society. The ancestors are to be treated with respect, and this necessarily entails that the living owe certain obligations towards them.

Among these obligations to ancestors is a duty to preserve the environment for future generations.[2] Thus, Wiredu (1994), widely regarded as one of the foremost living African philosophers, writes:

> Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be nonplussed by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In upshot there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal. (46)

According to Wiredu, it is inconceivable in African thought that the present generation does not have moral obligations towards future generations. Whilst the notion that we owe something morally to unborn generations has been the subject of much contestation in Western philosophy, it is taken as almost obvious by Africans. Wiredu suggests that the present generation has a dual moral responsibility to previous and future generations. To past generations of ancestors, Africans owe both respect and gratitude, since, among other things, it was their responsible stewardship of the environment (or 'the resources of the land') that left nature in a condition that was beneficial to the current generation. Gratitude towards the ancestors is realised by continuing to care for nature in the present, and emulating the example of previous generations, by ensuring that the next generation also inherits an environment 'in good shape' (Wiredu 1994, 46).

Other African writers make similar claims. Renowned central African theologian, Benezet Bujo, confirms the association between duties to ancestors and an obligation to future generations, claiming that the African 'ethical community' extends beyond the living and includes the ancestors. They play a role in guiding the moral life of the community, one which continues

after their bodily death, and involves ensuring the continued strength of their descendants (Bujo 1998, 27). Zimbabwe-born Munyaradzi Felix Murove, writing about *Ukama* (a word for 'relationality' used by many in Zimbabwe) suggests that this ethic entails moral responsibility for the well-being of future persons and that maintaining harmonious relationships in the present represents a promise to ensure similar relationships with the future. Current well-being is also seen as having been contributed to by the past. He refers to Bujo's description of a sense of community between the present and their ancestors as 'anamnestic solidarity'. The living maintain the memory of those who have come before, sharing their lives with their ancestors in order to ensure harmony into the future. The life experience of the current generation is understood as being grounded in the past, and

> . . . the present will contribute to its own existence into the future when it has become the past. Through anamnestic solidarity, the communal life of the living (the present) and that of the ancestors (the past) is re-enacted as a gift to be shared and passed on to posterity. (Murove 2004, 184)

Pointing in particular to concerns about energy use and population policy, the Nigerian Catholic theologian Amuluche Nnamani (2005) claims that as current concerns for the environment grow more pressing, we find ourselves needing to broaden our sense of the scope of our moral obligations, to include future generations within the ambit of our moral duties and to grant moral standing to future persons (396).

Clearly, then, there is a strong ethical tradition in African thought that might be said to include future generations in the locus of moral considerability. This is often expressed in terms of including not just the living, but also ancestors (the 'living dead') and descendants in the ethical or moral community. Given the strong sense of communitarianism in African thought, it is not unexpected that the term 'community' is used in this way. However, to avoid the confusion that could arise as a consequence of using the word 'community' in too many different senses, I will speak instead of a 'moral circle'. By this, I mean the set of entities that are morally considerable, which should be taken into account directly in our moral deliberations. Whereas 'moral community' might easily be thought to imply a grouping with reciprocal moral obligations towards one another, 'moral circle' does not as strongly suggest such direct reciprocity. This seems more appropriate for a notion that is meant to include contingent, future beings that do not yet exist, within the set of morally considerable entities. In African thought, then, future and past generations are included in the moral circle. In terms more traditionally African, they are also part of the web of life.[3] The interconnectedness of the parts of the web of life transcends generations. Clearly, future people cannot reciprocate the efforts made by the present on their behalf, but this does not free the living from moral responsibilities towards the yet to be born, not in this African view, at least.

Before considering these African conceptions in more detail, I need to briefly deal with some possible concerns about the metaphysical beliefs upon which they are based. Clearly, there are many people who do not share a belief that the recently dead continue to have an actual presence in the world as the 'living dead'. Even more contentious is the idea that the dead can continue to influence the living by punishing and rewarding them. So, it might seem as if these African notions are of little relevance except to those who hold the contested metaphysical beliefs that undergird them. It might then be easy to write these ideas off as being of quaint anthropological interest and little more. However, although it is true that moral obligations towards future generations in African thought are often associated with beliefs regarding ancestors, the notion of duties to posterity does not depend on accepting these metaphysical beliefs about the living dead. It is not necessary to regard the environment as belonging to the ancestors, or being under their guardianship, to conceive of it as a shared inheritance or common good. It is also possible to conceive of the moral circle as transcending generations, without believing in the continued

presence of ancestors. Furthermore, I will argue that it is reasonable to conceive of duties towards our predecessors, who have died, and especially of a duty of gratitude which can be realised as an indirect duty to our descendants, without having to believe that our predecessors are still present in the world in some metaphysical sense. These African notions of moral obligation towards future persons can be secularised and released from their traditional metaphysical moorings.

African thought may well regard the moral circle as being trans-generational, and see future generations as morally considerable. However, just because many Africans might think in this way does not mean that it is reasonable or justified. Thus, I seek to defend the plausibility of these broad African grounds for thinking that we have moral obligations towards future generations. I give an account of how this obligation is conceived, and show that this conception of obligation is plausible and merits attention. First, I consider the African conception that the environment is a shared resource, based on an African sense of land ownership. This conception accounts for a direct obligation to posterity. I seek not only to explain this conception, but also to argue for its plausibility.[4]

The environment as a communal asset shared across generations

It is trite to distinguish a traditional African sense of ownership or property from the Western notion of individual or private ownership. Despite a history of many generations in which Western models of land ownership have prevailed, many Africans still prefer to understand the land as ultimately a communal rather than an individual asset. Part of the role of the ancestors is to act as guardians of the land, ensuring that it remains available to the community through indefinite time (Sadomba 2009, 2). So, it might be thought that the land belongs to a community, but the community is something conceived of as existing over many generations, including past and future members. The land, then, is a resource to be shared, even with other generations. This notion of land may also be understood in a Leopold-like sense, as representing more than just a geographically definable piece of earth, and embracing the environment more broadly. Communal environmental goods are to be shared. Thus, Nigerian theorist Matthew Izibili appeals to the notion of a mortgage that future people hold over the present with respect to the environment. On his account, natural goods cannot be understood as actually belonging to any person or tribe or clan, and each successive generation ought to regard the environment as something it has received on loan. Each generation ought to return the environment in at least as good or better a condition as it was when it first 'borrowed' it. On these grounds, he goes on to affirm the claim that an important duty of public authorities and governments is to promote the conservation of the 'environmental common good' (Izibili 2005, 383).[5]

What is important on this African approach is the *attitude* we have towards the environment. If we regard it as something we share across generations, as something that is given to us to use for our benefit, but that needs to be handed on to future generations for their use, we are more likely to not abuse it, than if our attitude is that it is ours to do with as we will. If we are convinced that we should regard the environment as a common good, shared between generations, something more on loan to the current generation than owned by it, then it is easy enough to argue that future generations are morally considerable, since we currently have the use of goods (the environment) that we ultimately share with them. If we overuse, abuse, or damage the environment, we rob future generations of part of their inheritance. We have a direct moral obligation towards them with respect to how we treat our shared inheritance, the environment. Fundamentally, where any resource is to be shared in common with others, it is obvious that those who share such a resource have obligations towards those with whom they share such a resource, with respect to how the resource is used.

Whilst this understanding of the environment as a shared resource might not be as prevalent in Western thought as it is in African thought, it has also found support by some Western theorists. In discussing traditional Western treatments of inter-generational obligation, O'Neill (1993) describes a

> . . . temporal myopia that infects modern society. The question of obligations to future generations is posed in terms of abstract obligations to possible future people who are strangers to us. The argument is premised on the lack of a sense of continuity of the present with both the past and the future. (46)

He claims that succeeding generations of people in the past acknowledged moral obligations to posterity. He argues that modern Western thinking has lost a conception of being part of a family or community with a sense of identity that spans generations. In times when land was perceived as a communal possession of groups or families over an extended period of time, each generation saw itself as members of a 'collective' that existed over many generations. Such a sense of continuity has been lost by modern society, with its strongly individualist bent and its notion of private ownership (O'Neill 1993, 47). O'Neill's insights closely echo the African conceptions of an inter-generational moral circle and of nature as being a shared resource. It is interesting to note that in O'Neill's account it is modern Western thought that seems out of step with a basic intuition that we have moral obligations to future generations, because it (seemingly alone) is a worldview which fails to understand the moral circle as one that transcends generations, including past, present, and future persons in a collective. Indeed, a sense of the temporal continuity of the moral circle is not a salient feature of either utilitarian or respect-based moral theories.

Many of the theoretical problems associated with moral obligations to posterity arise precisely because the issue is framed in individualist rather than communal terms (O'Neill 1993, 47). An African sense of inter-generational justice must be understood in communitarian terms. A communal sense of identity and solidarity lies at the heart of African ethics, with its strongly relational character.[6] Coupled with a sense that the natural environment is not something that can be individually owned, but is rather shared and taken on loan, as it were, *whole generations*, as collectives, might be said to have an obligation to preserve the natural environment for future generations, also as collectives. O' Neill argues that the modern notion of individual ownership of land lies at the root of a loss of a sense of identity with past and future generations, collectively. It is true that we cannot know the individuals who will exist in the future as individuals, and that we cannot easily ascribe individual rights to them. However, in a paper dealing specifically with establishing rights for future persons, Edith Weiss claims that some of the theoretical concerns about such rights might be overcome if we re-cast our notion of rights in terms of group rather than individual rights. She maintains that generational rights are best conceived as group or communal rights. 'Generations hold these rights as groups in relation to other generations – past, present, and future' (Weiss 1996, 611–12). We do not need to know who the individuals are who will make up a future generation as a group to conceive of that generation as having moral claims upon our generation. This resonates strongly with African thought, in which the importance of solidarity and identity is stressed. And, it is possible that ethicists might find it less difficult to make a case for future rights if they cast them in a communal rather than a typically Western individualist mould. Whether it is desirable or necessary to frame moral obligations to posterity in terms of rights held by future generations is not all that germane to the case I am trying to make here. What is important is that an African sense of our moral circle crosses generations, and establishes an obligation to treat the natural environment as a shared inheritance with past and future generations, not only of our own family, but of the community as a whole.

The notion of land being something that is communally owned is contentious, and might be rejected by those who regard private ownership as a fundamental aspect of an orderly,

productive, or just society. An obvious basis for objections to the case I have been making in this section lies in the association of the notion of communal ownership with seeing the moral circle as something that crosses generations. However, it is by no means my intention to make a claim here for the desirability, or otherwise, of communal land ownership. A distinction can be made between an *attitude* towards the environment in which it is ultimately regarded as a shared resource and the notion of collective land ownership. A model of ownership which grants individuals control over the use of specific portion of land is not incompatible with a value system in which the environment as a whole is understood as ultimately being a shared resource. What is important is not so much who has control over individual tracts of land at any particular time, but that our fundamental conception of the natural environment is that it is an inheritance we share with others, even across generations. The point that O'Neill makes is that the notion of private ownership, which has become dominant in the Western world, is responsible for a historical shift in our attitude to the environment towards seeing it as something we are free to use in any way we choose. It has also contributed to what he describes as the 'temporal myopia' of the modern worldview, in which we no longer readily see ourselves as part of a moral circle that crosses generations (O'Neill 1993, 46). It was perhaps easier for societies in which land was communally owned to appreciate that the environment is a shared resource. However, this does not entail a necessity to revert to communalism in order to preserve the natural environment. Whatever the preferred model of land ownership might be, what is important is that humankind's attitude to the environment, generally, needs to be that it is ultimately a good that we hold in common, a shared inheritance, belonging not to the current generation only, but to all generations.

Gratitude and moral obligation towards future persons

The second African notion that I maintain holds promise for accounting for why we have obligations to posterity is the idea that out of gratitude to our predecessors we have an indirect moral duty to posterity to use the environment responsibly and treat it with circumspection. In this section, I set out to show how gratitude is able to ground a moral obligation to posterity as well as explain what that obligation consists in. I have pointed out that many Africans think that since they have inherited the environment from their predecessors in a state which enables their continued livelihood, they ought to show respect and gratitude to their ancestors by emulating the example of their predecessors, by preserving the environment for posterity. What remains unclear, however, is exactly how being grateful to predecessors is able to entail some kind of indirect moral duty towards posterity.

A noteworthy aspect of an African sense of moral obligations towards the future lies in the close association between duties to ancestors and duties to descendants. Here, we have a sense in which it is understood that, at least in part, what we do to ensure the well-being of future people is an indirect duty towards them: one derived from a direct duty to our forebears. Clearly, taken literally, the idea that we can have on-going duties to the dead – duties that extend beyond commonly held notions of respect for their memory, posthumous wishes, and bodily remains – and entail duties to future persons is not all that easy to come to terms with theoretically. This is especially so since the moral obligation thought to be imposed by gratitude to the ancestors is directed not towards them, but to another object altogether.

For a notion of gratitude to entail moral obligation towards a party other than the one to whom we are grateful, it would need to be construed as something more than an affective response, less an emotion, and more a general attitude or predisposition to see the world in a certain way. A.D.M. Walker distinguishes between 'gratitude' and 'gratefulness', preferring the latter term as a better descriptor of an attitude than the former. He argues that gratefulness does not always require an object: someone or something towards which it is directed. We may

be grateful for good weather on a picnic day without being grateful to anyone or anything in particular for the suitable weather. Walker defines grateful people as those who respond to the good favour that others and life has bestowed upon them by developing a character that is disposed to gratefulness (Walker 1980–1981, 45–51). I do not see any pertinent reason for following Walker's linguistic distinction between gratitude and gratefulness. But, his distinction between gratitude as an emotional response, and as attitude of mind, is helpful. When one thinks about gratitude more as an attitude and less as an emotional response, it seems to take on the nature of what we typically describe as a virtue. It is *prima facie* plausible that a person who is predisposed to gratitude, who has cultivated the virtue of gratefulness, might well feel compelled to show favour or benevolence towards another to whom she does not directly owe gratitude.

To explain how this indirect duty of gratitude might work a little more clearly, I turn to Michael McCullough's psychological treatment of the notion of gratitude. He claims that:

> Like hope, one of the key psychological processes governing gratitude may be a mindful awareness – specifically, awareness of how one's life is held together through the benevolent actions of other people. Grateful people, on recalling a positive outcome in their lives, are mindful of the causal agents ... who have acted in ways that benefitted them .... [G]rateful people ... pay attention to the ways in which their lives are connected to other events and activities occurring in the social, natural, and (for some people) supernatural world. (McCullough 2002, 303)

This brings us rather nicely back to an African sense of moral obligation grounded in interconnectedness, to the idea of a web of life. We could not have experienced the good benefits of a natural world capable of sustaining our lives had our predecessors not sought to preserve the environment on our behalf. We should bear in mind that others have made these benefits possible and, as a result, we should cultivate a virtue of gratitude, which may include a general disposition to show favour to others, even if we have no reason to be grateful to them directly.

It still remains for me to make a case that developing a character of gratefulness might be capable of establishing some kind of actual obligation towards others. A grateful person might be inclined to bestow favour on others, but this would not necessarily impose a duty of benevolence on her. Walker provides examples of obligations of gratitude within social institutions. He correctly claims that we find it perfectly reasonable to think that children are under some obligation to demonstrate gratitude by caring for their aging parents, and that hospitality ought to be reciprocated. For Walker, such obligations are grounded in considerations of fairness: '... it is unfair to profit from the efforts of others within a set of institutional arrangements and not reciprocate ourselves when the principles of the institution require this' (Walker 1980–1981, 40). What is most significant, here, is that in co-operative social institutions, reciprocating the good others do on our behalf seems right, because it would be fair. Now, this idea of fairness may well account for a duty of gratitude expressed in caring for aging parents (in essence, reciprocating the care parents bestowed on their children in the first place) and a duty of gratitude to those who have acted hospitably towards us by demonstrating hospitality to them in return (again, a matter of reciprocity), but is it able to explain how we may be obliged to preserve the environment for future generations as part of a debt of gratitude we owe our predecessors? The problem, of course, is that we cannot directly reciprocate what our predecessors have done for us with respect to leaving us a healthy environment. That said, though, if we have developed the virtue of gratefulness, this virtue would seem very shallow if it did not cause us to reflect on the fact that we can reciprocate, indirectly, by doing the same for our descendants. Perhaps, if we are able to recognise that our current well-being is owed to what our forebears did for us, it is not too much of a stretch for us to think that we ought to reciprocate in some way, and one way of doing this would be to accept a moral obligation to treat our descendants as our predecessors have treated us.

It may yet be objected that there is something just not quite right about the idea that our gratitude to those who have benefitted us ought to be demonstrated in treating others (who have not benefitted us) favourably. The idea that gratitude to one object can impose an obligation on us to treat some other object in a particular way may still seem indefensible to some. To defend this notion further, I appeal to some basic moral intuitions. In her treatment of gratitude and obligation, Card (1988) notes that with respect to responsibilities of gratitude, 'Some responsibilities are naturally carried out in relation to still other persons: a hitchhiker may pick up future hitchhikers, for example, or a student give help and encouragement to newer students' (120). A hitchhiker kindly offered a ride by a stranger has little to offer her benefactor other than an expression of thanks. However, it does not seem at all strange that should the hitchhiker one day be in a position to provide a ride to another person who needs it, she may feel that her gratitude for past kindness would be best expressed in now helping a completely different stranger. A paradigmatic example of demonstrating gratitude by extending favour to someone other than the person who has treated us well is that of mentorship. Many in the academic world have been fortunate enough to be taught and advised by individuals who have taken it upon themselves to go far beyond the call of duty in taking a personal interest in developing their academic skills and careers. They realise that they can never repay the favour to their mentors. But often, out of a sense of gratitude, they see it as incumbent upon themselves to emulate the example of their mentors, by similarly investing in the development of their own students in the future. So, too, might we come to think that gratitude to our predecessors might best be expressed in ensuring that future generations inherit an environment equally able to sustain their lives.

What is required on an African notion of trans-generational moral obligation is developing an attitude of gratitude, a cultivated habitual response of gratefulness grounded in acknowledging those who have provided for us in the past. Such a virtue of gratitude would be hollow and meaningless without a corresponding commitment to treat future generations equally as kindly as we had been treated. Thus, it is reasonable to think that we can have such an indirect duty towards future generations. It is likely that this backward-looking notion of duties to posterity is one of the most significant contributions African thought can make to our conception of moral obligations to the future. I do not claim that this African perspective is utterly unique, as I suspect that similar notions undergird a general moral intuition shared by at least some other non-Western cultures.[7] Nonetheless, it does seem able to offer helpful insights to the theoretical discourse on inter-generational moral obligation that has engaged Western philosophy for some decades now. Interestingly, some Western philosophers at least are able to offer further support to these conceptions, as I now set out to show.

Whilst Western philosophers have primarily concerned themselves with inter-generational obligations only with respect to the future, some have also suggested that a backward-looking sense of moral duty is of relevance. Callahan (1981) argues that we should conceive of society as a partnership between past, present, and future generations (76–7):

> That we exist at all puts us in debt to those who conceived us – our parents – and in debt to the society in which we were born, without which we might have been conceived but could not have survived (for our parents were not sufficient unto themselves). We could not exist had not someone and some society taken some responsibility for our welfare.

According to Callahan, if we in any way value our lives, then we ought to value and recognise an obligation towards those who made our lives possible, not only our own parents, but also the society that contributed to our ability to survive. This obligation of gratitude to the past further entails obligations to future generations: to ensure that they are provided with at least as much as we were, and even to '... an amelioration of those conditions which, in our own

life … lessened our possibilities for living a full human life' (Callahan 1981, 77). He points out that in addition to an obvious biological association between generations, current generations exist only because of the provision of their predecessors. He claims that this is most obvious when considering succeeding generations, but applies to generations separated by greater periods of time, too. He concludes with a statement very reminiscent of some of the claims of African scholars above: 'To live at all is to be linked in an inextricable way to the past, and to be a determinant of future generations' (Callahan 1981, 77).

Strengths of this African notion of moral obligation to future generations

The notion of trans-generational obligation grounded in African thought that I have described so far is characterised by an emphasis on the continuity of a shared identity of persons through generations. Individuals perceive of themselves as belonging to a communal lineage comprising ancestors, the living, and the yet to be born. As generation gives way to generation, this chain is perpetuated. Since one's ancestors made provision on one's behalf, ensuring that the environment (social, natural, and built) was able to sustain one's own life, one owes a debt of gratitude to the ancestors. This debt not only entails honouring their memory, it requires respect and the nurturing of a virtue of gratitude. This virtue, in turn, leads to a moral compunction to honour those who have come before by seeking to ensure that one's descendants are equally provided for. A number of African writers specifically identify the natural environment, or the land, as a common inheritance that needs to be preserved as part of this duty to posterity.

The strength of such an African-inspired approach lies in its ability to overcome, at least to some extent, some of the theoretical concerns about moral obligations to the future Western philosophers have identified. The communitarian emphasis in African thought directs us away from conceiving of duties to posterity or the rights of future persons in individualist terms.[8] Generations themselves are communities (the community of the currently living), and so are preceding and succeeding generations. It is these generational communities as groups who owe duties to the generations who have come before, and those who are yet to be born. Conceived in this collectivist sense, trans-generational responsibilities appear less bedevilled by theoretical philosophical problems. We do not need to know who exactly future individual persons will be to know that, short of a major cataclysm, future generations of persons will most likely exist. Since our obligation is one owed by our generation as a whole to future generations, as wholes, exactly which future people come into existence is of little relevance, as is any concern that different future people might come into existence, based on this generation's choices. Similarly, since we are not conceiving of our duties to posterity in terms of respecting future autonomous individual persons, it is again of little relevance who these future persons are. Our generation owes a duty to preserve the environment for future generations, who are likely to be more similar to us than different, and to have very similar basic needs. So, whilst it is true that we cannot be expected to know exactly what all of the specific needs of future generations will be, or how best to ensure that we leave them a world capable of providing those needs, we can know that they are most likely to need certain basic life sustaining goods such as clean water, air, food, and shelter. No generation could ask of its predecessors more than that they should anticipate these basic needs, and try to ensure that they can be fulfilled into the indefinite future. That they might make mistakes, based on their ignorance of what future generations might actually need most, is no reason for the present generation not to seek to ensure the welfare of future generations, not when the basis of our ethical code includes a sense of solidarity and shared identity with future generations. Parents might take out a financial policy to provide for their newborn's education in the future, only to discover when the young adult is ready for university that the financial provision is woefully inadequate. Their child would be uncharitable not to

acknowledge and be grateful for his parents' attempt to provide for his future merely on the grounds that they were not able to anticipate quite how expensive a university education would be 20 years later. What is important is that each generation should try to ensure the well-being of those who will follow.

The theoretical concern about the inability of future generations to reciprocate the current generation's provision on their behalf also becomes less problematic when a sense of solidarity between past, present, and future people exists. In a sense, a kind of reciprocity can be said to operate, as each generation honours its predecessors by reciprocating in terms of making provision for the future in the same way as was done for itself.

The motivational problem identified by many theorists may prove somewhat more intransigent. Regarding climate change issues Stephen Gardiner has shown just how many factors combine to make it very difficult for us to make some of the hard but right choices that need to be made on behalf of future generations. The very nature of the effects of climate change being spatially and temporally dispersed make it difficult for the global community to put in place institutions capable of making it rational for individual countries to co-operate towards the goal of a more stable climate (Gardiner 2006, *passim*). Seabright (2010) similarly points to reasons for this motivational problem:

> . . . due to the nature of [the] threats [posed by climate change], they fail to engage the experiential or affective mode of moral judgment; this is why there is little moral concern or motivation. Moral reactions to climate change are limited to analytically based judgments; this is why they tend to be relatively dispassionate, . . . and impersonal'. (9)

Other environmental issues are similarly affected. Nonetheless, if Western value systems were adapted to acknowledge a fundamental sense in which generations share a sense of identity over time, and are joint custodians of the earth, this might go some way towards overcoming some of this motivational paralysis.

Conclusion

African thought does not limit moral considerabilty to only the current generation. It conceives of a web of life that transcends generations, and of the environment as a resource shared by different generations. This entails a direct moral obligation to preserve the environment for future persons, since it is a communal good. Africans also expect that the current generation should develop an attitude of gratitude towards their predecessors for having preserved the environment on their behalf. This virtue of gratefulness ought to be realised by the current generation seeking to reciprocate by preserving the environment for future generations, in turn. These are not only plausible grounds for thinking that future generations are morally considerable, and that we do have moral obligations towards them respecting the environment, but they also go some way towards overcoming some of the theoretical problems associated with conceiving of moral duties towards posterity.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the contribution of Thaddeus Metz who made very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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Notes

1. In making reference to these African notions, I am not suggesting that there is a single African worldview, or that all African theorists would support these notions. Rather, I focus on prominent themes that recur and appear to be shared by many Africans. I am most intimately familiar with the thought and work of the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Africa, but have drawn widely on sub-Saharan African sources in my research.
2. My focus in this article is very specifically on African notions which overtly establish moral obligations to future generations with respect to the environment. This article is part of a larger project in which I endeavour to develop an African relational environmental ethic, grounded in sub-Saharan conceptions of *Ubuntu* (human-ness), *Ukama* (relationality), the inter-dependence of all parts of the web of life, solidarity, and harmonious relationships. In this work, I draw on the contributions of many African philosophers to counter an assumption that African thought and philosophy has little of value to contribute to environmental ethical discourse. Quite the contrary, I show that there is much in African thought and philosophy that can deeply enrich our eco-philosophy (Behrens 2011).
3. In other work, I have provided an account of moral considerability, based on prevalent African conceptions, in which the criterion for establishing moral considerability is that entities can be said to be part of a 'web of life'. This is strongly grounded in an African notion of the inter-relatedness of natural entities, and a basic moral obligation live in harmony with other parts of the web of life (Behrens 2011). Here, I claim that the web of life, in African thought, transcends generations, too.
4. In the following section, I consider the second of the African notions I have identified as being relevant: the conception that gratitude towards preceding generations grounds some kind of indirect moral obligation towards future persons.
5. Whilst the idea of preserving the environment because it is a shared resource, as it is expressed here, sounds very anthropocentric, only valuing nature as a resource for human use, I have argued elsewhere that African thought is not inherently anthropocentric. There is also a strong emphasis on respecting nature expressed by many African theorists (Behrens 2010). For some examples, see Kelbessa (2005), Murove (2004), Nnamani (2005), Oruka (1994), Sindima (1990), and Tangwa (2004).
6. Thaddeus Metz, a respected philosopher based in South Africa, has recently published extensively on developing a moral theory grounded in African thought. He describes an African notion of right action in terms of the combination of 'identity' and 'solidarity', identifying with others within one's group, co-operating to achieve common ends, helping one another, and reacting emotionally to the good of one another (Metz 2007, 337).
7. For example, a native American proverb asserts that all decisions taken should consider the interests of the following seven generations (VanDeVeer and Pierce 2003, 419).
8. Tim Murithi argues for the enrichment of our conception of international human rights by incorporating values that affirm human dignity which are intrinsic to other non-Western traditions. Focussing particularly on the notion of *Ubuntu* (a term used to describe a traditional sub-Saharan ethical perspective emphasising solidarity, sharing, and mutual inter-dependence), he suggests that incorporating the principles of *Ubuntu* into our conception of human rights can '... serve as a basis for re-emphasising our collective human rights' (Murithi 2007, 283). He further argues that this has been expressed in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of the Organisation of African Unity which seeks '... to promote and protect human and communal rights. It [seeks] to codify this notion of communality through its emphasis on 'peoples' (Murithi 2007, 284).

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