

Samuel Scheffler

*Why Worry About Future Generations?*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

ISBN: 978-0-198-79898-9 (HB) \$24.95. 160pp.

In *Why Worry About Future Generations?* Samuel Scheffler argues that our reasons to care about what happens to people who will not be born until after all of us are gone are not limited to duties of beneficence. Many of the activities we presently perform and most deeply value require the prospect that these activities can be continued by later people. One can think of contributing to science, art, traditions and family life. It is exactly the fact that such activities transcend our individual involvement in them that often transfers meaning and value to them. Therefore, the prospect of the end of humanity, even if we would not be around ourselves to experience it, would reduce the value of our present activities. This gives us an entirely different reason to worry about the future than deontological duties towards future generations not to harm them or consequentialist duties to maximise future wellbeing. Scheffler suggests that we have four (related) reasons to try to ensure the survival and flourishing of those who come after us: a present interest in leading lives engaged in worthwhile activities, love of humanity, a desire that the things that we value survive into the future and reciprocity because of our dependence on future flourishing. *Why Worry About Future Generations?* builds on Scheffler's previous book *Death and the Afterlife*, which in turn builds on his Tanner Lectures on Human Values given in 2012 at the University of California. New lines of thought include discussions on conservatism and temporal bias. Scheffler argues for example that conservatism, which he interprets as a preference for valuable things that exist over valuable things that do not yet exist, supports rather than competes with our concern for the survival and flourishing of future generations.

The importance of this widening of motives to care about future generations can hardly be overstated. On the one hand, humanity does in fact face existential threats, for example due to long-term environmental problems such as climate change. A long-standing question in environmental philosophy therefore has been what can motivate present people to change their cherished lifestyles and consumption patterns to the benefit of future people we ourselves will never meet. On the other hand, the standard repertoire of deontological and consequentialist reasons to care about our fellowmen has proved to face substantial theoretical problems when applied to the future. The idea, for example, that future generations have rights not to be harmed faces the notorious 'non-identity problem': we cannot harm future individuals by burning fossil fuels, because if we made our economy carbon-free, as a result different people would be born and individuals with a different identity would inhabit the future. No future individual can therefore be better off or worse off than she would otherwise have been due to our present policy. If, on the other hand, one believes that identity is irrelevant and that our duty is to maximise happiness or wellbeing, one faces the so-called 'repugnant conclusion': that if the total happiness of a hundred billion people living on subsistence level would outweigh the total happiness of seven billion people living comfortable and flourishing lives, that we should bring about the first option. The reasons Scheffler offers to worry about future generations are invulnerable to these philosophical problems.

Although *Why Worry About Future Generations?* is to be praised for spreading the message and further exploration of the importance of future generations for our existing values and attachments, it is a pity that Scheffler appears largely unaware of the work on the same subject that has been performed by others before him, particularly in environmental philosophy. In the first footnote to the second chapter Scheffler even admits that he has ‘not attempted to identify or survey all the historical antecedents of the idea’ (p. 41). That is a pity. First, because it fails to give credit to previous sources, particularly Ernest Partridge’s ‘Why Care About the Future?’ published in *Alternative Futures* in 1980. This article basically makes the same central point as Scheffler: starting with a thought-experiment of a doomsday scenario to arouse awareness of our deeper values, Partridge argues that well-functioning human beings have a need for self-transcendence. People ‘identify with, and seek to further, the well-being, preservation, and endurance of communities, locations, causes, artifacts, institutions, ideals, and so on, that are outside themselves and that they hope will flourish beyond their own lifetimes’ (p. 78). Other environmental philosophers who emphasised our interest in creating an environment where our social and cultural values can endure include for example John Passmore, Douglas MacLean, John O’Neill, Lucas Meyer and Hendrik Visser ’t Hooft.

A second reason why Scheffler could better have identified previous work on the subject is that he could have achieved more depth by building on earlier analyses. This holds in particular for David Heyd’s *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People*, published in 1992, which remains one of the best studies on the subject. Heyd’s analysis, for example, of why we have an interest in a future that is neither a mirror image of our own time nor revolutionary different but contains an element of change and progress, would have benefitted Scheffler’s discussion on conservatism. So although Scheffler has made a persuasive case that there is an alternative to thinking about problems of future generations in exclusively moral terms, his case would have been even more persuasive if he would have accounted for the historical antecedents of his ideas.

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