A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part the question of how to go about deciding the moral significance of any action is considered and an answer in terms of what is called the reasons for action approach is provided. The second part critically reviews some of the most cogent and interesting material which has been written on the subject of responsibility to future generations. All of the positions examined are found to be unacceptable. The third part considers, in the light of parts one and two, both what grounds can be adduced for our feeling of responsibility to future generations and what the relation of this responsibility is to our other moral obligations. It is concluded that there are solid grounds supporting the claim that we have a responsibility to future generations. Further, a decision procedure is suggested for determining, in particular cases, how we should act with regard to future generations.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent document est divisé en trois parties. Dans la première, l'auteur indique comment juger de la signification morale de toute action et présente une réponse axée sur une approche fondée sur une analyse des motifs de l'agir. La deuxième partie fait une analyse critique de quelques-uns des ouvrages les plus intéressants et les plus convaincants qui aient été publiés sur la question de la responsabilité que doit ressentir une génération envers les générations qui la suivent. Toutes les solutions étudiées s'avèrent inacceptables. La troisième partie examine, à la lumière des parties I et II, les fondements sur lesquels nous pouvons appuyer le sentiment de responsabilité que nous ressentons envers les générations à venir et aussi les rapports entre cette responsabilité que nous ressentons envers les générations à venir et aussi les rapports entre cette responsabilité et nos autres obligations morales. En conclusion, on soutient qu'il y a d'excellents arguments pour avancer l'existence d'une responsabilité envers les générations à venir. De plus, l'auteur présente une méthode permettant de décider, dans des cas précis, de la façon dont nous devrions nous comporter, en fonction de notre responsabilité envers les générations à venir.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

R. Gaizauskas, a native of Ottawa, attended the University of Toronto for two years, 1972-74, where he studied mathematics and physics. He then moved to Carleton University where he completed his Honours B.A. in philosophy in 1976. Continuing into the graduate program there, he wrote his Master's thesis (Contradictions and Incompleteness: Godel's Result Re-examined) and obtained his M.A. in the spring of 1978. His interests, while most recently centered on logic, have also led him to do considerable work in the areas of philosophy of science and, with acknowledgements to the AECB, ethics. In 1978-79 he will, as a sessional lecturer, teach a course in logic at Carleton University. During this time he hopes to rewrite his Master's thesis for publication.
One feature which characterizes discussion on the management of radioactive wastes is the emphasis placed on the need to consider the well-being of future generations. In view of the fact that radioactive wastes may give rise to problems in the future, this concern and attention is certainly justified. It is strange, however, that such concern is reserved almost exclusively for radioactive materials which actually decrease in hazard as time passes, due to the natural process called radioactive decay. Other wastes and potential pollutants created by society have no such inherent reduction of hazard and will remain at the same level of toxicity, literally forever.

Nevertheless, the intention to safeguard the well-being of future generations is an integral component of all plans for the long term containment and isolation of radioactive wastes. The whole idea behind the deep geological disposal of the so-called high level wastes is that the wastes will be prevented from returning to the biosphere during the period of time they remain potentially hazardous. These facilities are designed to avoid the necessity of relying on continued human involvement and to ensure that no harm will result if, at some time in the future, knowledge of the location of the site is lost. It is a fundamental assumption in all strategies for the management of radioactive wastes that future generations will not have to look after the wastes created by the present one.

Among the people who have developed the technical solutions which attempt to meet these essentially moral concerns, there sometimes arise questions concerning the reasons why future generations command the attention they do and why it is felt that they should not or cannot be expected to provide systems of management for thousands of years into the future.

To obtain at least a first look at some of the answers to these interesting, non-technical questions, the Atomic Energy Control Board obtained the assistance of postgraduate students to look at certain specific topics over a period of a few months, while on leave from their university studies. During the summer of 1977, a philosophy graduate was asked to comment on the nature of the obligation which is felt towards future generations and to
place it in context with other obligations accepted by society(1). At the same time, a history student was asked to provide an opinion on whether present generations are unique in showing concern for their distant descendants, or whether similar behaviour can also be ascribed to people in the past. It appears from the five month survey of 5,000 years of history that we are almost certainly not the first to act in this fashion(2). In 1978, two other students, one a political scientist and the other a sociologist, were given the task of providing an estimate of the period of time for which it is reasonable to rely on institutional controls(3). The response to this question has direct application in deciding what kinds of radioactive wastes should be disposed of by methods which rely on the continued presence of humans.

There are many non-technical aspects of radioactive waste management which could be looked at. These three reports represent only the beginning of what could be both long and interesting studies. Any further work of this kind carried out by the ABCB will continue to rely on experts in the arts and humanities, and will almost certainly continue to involve input from students in the younger generation.

(1) R.J. Gaiauskas, "A Philosophical Examination of our Responsibility to Future Generations", ABCB 1159, October 1977

(2) M. MacKenzie, "Responsibility to Future Generations - An Historical Perspective", ABCB 1160, October 1977

(3) M. Badibanga and R. Gagnon, "Longévité d'un système de contrôle institutionnel", ABCB 1161, September 1978
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A preface being the place for qualifications, I shall make mine here and be done with them. From the very outset this paper has been the product of a tension: on the one hand, as it purports to contribute to the ongoing philosophical debate on obligations to future generations, it tries to meet the rigorous and critical demands of the philosophical audience, demands which frequently force philosophical papers into realms of abstraction from which they never return; on the other hand, as it was commissioned by the AECB, a group concerned with making policy recommendations, conclusions specific enough to guide us in acting were required. Put another way, what was required was enough of a theoretical approach to make the position adopted philosophically convincing, and enough discussion of the application of the principles derived theoretically to demonstrate their effectiveness in practice. This sort of tension undoubtedly has both its positive and negative aspects; positive because it forces the philosopher out of his ivory tower into the realm of actual decision-making and the scientist/policy-maker out of the obscuring clouds of day-to-day detail into the area of reflection on the fundamental objectives of his policies; negative because it involves inevitable compromises on both sides. I can only hope that I have struck a happy balance.

Much more could have been said, especially regarding the metaethical position I develop in Parts 1 and 4 which is the real backbone of the paper. Space and time were limiting factors, however, and again I can only hope that what has been said is enough to make the position clear and convincing.

I should like to acknowledge the invaluable role played by Andrew Brook in the writing of this paper. His enthusiasm and critical acumen have made this paper incomparably better than it would have been without them. I should also like to thank John Coady whose congeniality and honest interest in things outside his discipline made it a pleasure to work for him. Finally, my thanks to Constantine Melakopides who provided valuable references and conversations.
Our intention in this part of the paper is to indicate how we go about determining the moral significance of any action. The approach will be partly by topic and partly historical. That is, we shall deal with questions in order of arising but when reference to history of ethics helps to clarify positions, alternatives, or procedures, reference shall be made.

1. Explanation versus Justification

When we ask a question such as "Do we have a responsibility to future generations?" or more generally "Do we have a responsibility to act in a particular way, P?" we are wondering what we should or ought to do. That is, we are prepared to admit that the way in which we have been, or are, or are contemplating acting may be deficient and are prepared to alter our behavior if we can be persuaded that we ought to.

Thus we may initially distinguish two general questions: 1) Do we act in a particular way, P, and if so why? 2) Should we act in a particular way, P, and if so why? An answer to question 1) provides an explanation of acting P-wise. An answer to question 2) provides a justification for doing so. It is important to examine this distinction, for certain problems arise concerning it which might seem to jeopardize, from the start, the project we are interested in, that of justification.

Let us look first at explanation. In the second part of the first question - "Why do we act P-wise?" - we may distinguish two further questions: a) Is it our reasons for acting P-wise that lead us to act P-wise, or is it something else, and if so what? b) If it is our reasons that lead us to act P-wise, how have we come to acquire the particular reasons that lead us to act P-wise? If we answer yes to the first alternative presented in a) then b) remains the only question. An answer to b), for instance, might be a psychological, a sociological, or an historical explanation insofar as the acting individual's reasons are seen to be
determined by his psychological make-up (e.g. a dominating super-ego),
by his social milieu (e.g. lower class, poorly educated), or by a traditional
ideology (e.g. Christianity). If, however, we favour the second alternative
in a) then we must provide an account of what does, in lieu of our reasons,
explain our behaviour. This might perhaps be done on the basis of a
radical psychology which maintained that all our actions are determined
by inner unconscious forces, or by a behaviourist theory which denied the
existence of reasons and talked only about brain states.

In contrast to explanation stands justification. In justifying acting
P-wise considerations of whether we do or do not act P-wise, or of how we
come to act this way, are irrelevant; what we must do is show what good
arguments or reasons can be provided for acting P-wise. Necessarily, some
investigation of what is right or what are reasons for action is required
in order to determine what counts as justification. Once this has been
carried out, deciding whether we should act P-wise amounts to determining
whether acting P-wise is consistent with what we have decided is right,
with what count as our reasons for action.

As was indicated at the beginning of this section, we are interested
in how we should treat future generations and hence in justifying some one
manner of acting with regard to them (be it ignoring them, taking their
interests into account when convenient, giving their interests a high
priority, or whatever). Given what we have said about explanation, though,
it might be thought that some fundamental objections regarding the possib­
ality of justification and the kind of justification available can be made:

1) If, as is suggested by the second alternative in a) above, reasons are
never sufficient to determine our actions, then there can be no point
in trying to justify acting P-wise. For, if our reasons are never
sufficient to determine our actions, whatever conscious decision we
come to about acting P-wise will have no effect, or at least no effect
we can know of in advance, on the way we act.

2) Supposing we do allow that our reasons are, at least sometimes, sufficient
to determine our actions; then, it might still be objected that which
reasons for acting we find convincing are found so because of a psychological disposition on our part to find them convincing (this disposition might be the product of any number of factors - psychological, sociological, physiological, etc). If this were true then again there could be no question of justification, for the rightness or wrongness of arguments for or against acting P-wise would have no bearing on whether they were found acceptable. All that matters here is the disposition of the agent to find the arguments acceptable.

3) Supposing both that reasons are sufficient to determine our actions and also that it is not the case that reasons are only found acceptable because of a disposition to find them so on the agent's part; then, it might still be objected that while justification is possible, justifying acting P-wise does not involve presenting arguments or reasons for the "rightness" of acting P-wise for, since all reasons that are acted on are self-interested reasons, the sole question to be asked is whether acting P-wise is in our self-interest. One argument that is commonly advanced to show that all reasons that are acted upon are self-interested is the following: if I do something I must want to do it (e.g. even if I loathe visiting in-laws, if I do it I must "want" to do it in some sense - in order to fulfill a feeling of obligation, or in order to satisfy a complaining spouse, or whatever) and if I want to do it then I must conceive of deriving some benefit from it, for the object of every want is its satisfaction. Hence if I do something I must conceive of deriving some benefit from doing it and, therefore, all reasons for action are self-interested (e.g. one visits one's sick aunt because one feels obligated to do so, because one wants to make her happy, i.e. in order to satisfy one's feeling of obligation, in order to satisfy one's desire to make her happy).

Now, regarding these difficulties the following replies may be made: concerning 1): the onus is on its proponent to prove that our reasons never are sufficient to determine our actions, for it certainly appears that they are. For instance, it frequently happens that on account of
certain reasons someone becomes convinced that acting P-wise is right and he may then manage to persuade others, using the reasons that convinced him, of the rightness of acting P-wise. If we hear the reasons, are convinced, and act on this conviction there appears to be no doubt of their sufficiency in determining our action. The proponent of a) must show us why, in this sort of case, reasons are not sufficient to determine actions.

Concerning 2): though we do sometimes want to say that certain persons are prone to accept certain arguments because of their psychological make-up, it seems ludicrous to maintain that this is always the case. Indeed this view is a reductio ad absurdum of itself. There is no room for any notion of truth in a doctrine which claims that the only criterion for the acceptability of a thesis is the individual psychological disposition to accept it: consequently, the thesis maintaining this form of psychologism cannot itself be sensibly said to be either true or false. At this point the argument must end.

Concerning 3): the error here is to be found in the claim that if I want to do something I must conceive of deriving some benefit from doing it. The problem results from failing to distinguish my reasons for doing something from the benefit or satisfaction I receive from doing it. Thus, I may visit my sick aunt not in order to satisfy my feeling of obligation or in order to satisfy my desire to make her happy but for the reason that I feel obligated to do so, for the reason that I want to make her happy. In other words, while I may in fact derive some benefit from visiting my aunt, this benefit may have nothing to do with my reasons for visiting her, may be the furthest thing from my mind when I decide to make the visit. Thus it is not the case that all reasons for action must be self-interested reasons.

A further criticism may be made of the argument in 3). Even if it were true that all reasons for action were self-interested reasons the problem of deciding among conflicting self-interested reasons would still arise
(e.g. between wanting to visit my aunt and wanting to spend the afternoon at the beach). Surely we can now ask which self-interested reason ought to be accepted. How is this question to be answered? And how is the answer to be defended?

In this section we have introduced and distinguished the notions of explanation and justification and we have considered some problems that can arise concerning justification. Having reached the conclusion that justification of action is not pointless because reasons are never sufficient to determine our actions or because those reasons which are found convincing are found so because we are disposed to find them so and not because of their validity, and having reached the conclusion that justification of action is not simply a matter of giving self-interested reasons and hence of determining, in any particular case, whether acting in the proposed fashion is in our interest, we may now turn to our central concern, which is deciding how we are to determine how we should act, i.e. deciding what is to count as a justification for acting.

2. Approaches to Justification

How should we act? It seems to me that this question can be pursued in two ways which are perhaps in the long run identical but which, at least initially, suggest different questions and methods of approach.

1) When we ask "How should we act?" we are asking "How ought we to act" which is equivalent to asking "What is the right thing to do?". These questions invite certain responses which in turn lead to such questions as "What is the nature of goodness, of rightness?" and "What are the meanings of the terms "good", "right", and "ought"?".

2) When we ask "How should we act?" we are always confronted with a number of alternatives and so we are asking "What reasons are there for acting P-wise, Q-wise, or R-wise?" This sort of question leads in
turn to the question "What counts as a reason for action?" and indeed to the question "What is a reason?".

In each of these two approaches I have specified two levels of questions. Answers to the first level comprise what is known as normative ethics; answers to the second comprise metaethics. Clearly the metaethical questions are more fundamental but in order to become fully aware of the force of this assertion it is useful to look at some of the answers which have been given to the normative questions, i.e. the questions "What is the right thing to do?" and "What reasons are there for acting P-wise as opposed to Q-wise?".

The following are examples of normative theories:

1) utilitarianism: The utilitarian maintains that what is good (or a reason for action) is the greatest happiness or pleasure of the greatest number. Actions are right if they promote the good, i.e. if the promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

2) ethical egoism: The ethical egoist holds that what is good (or a reason for action) is his own greatest happiness or pleasure. Actions are right if they promote the good of the egoist.

3) Kantianism: Kant maintained that one ought always to obey the categorical imperative: "Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law".

4) the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them to unto you".

5) moral codes: Most religions and many other organizations have moral codes; for instance, the Ten Commandments - "Thou shalt not steal", etc.; the Scout Law - "A Scout's duty is to be useful and to help others", etc.
These are just a few examples of normative theories and it should be obvious that there are countless more. In passing, it might be noted that the moralities of traditional ideologies - Christian, liberal, socialist - are normative theories.

Now, with a multitude of different normative theories presenting themselves as answers to the questions "What is the right thing to do?" and "What reasons are there for acting P-wise as opposed to Q-wise?" it is evident that we need some criteria for determining which to accept. This demand explains the move to metaethics and the question, following the first approach, "What is the nature of goodness, or of rightness?" or, following the second approach, "What count as good reasons for action?". Only with an answer to these questions can we hope to feel satisfied with our choice of normative theory.

3. The First Approach

The first approach mentioned above regarding the problem of justification in ethics has traditionally received more attention than the second. Four major metaethical theories which have adopted this approach have dominated twentieth century moral philosophy in English-speaking countries. I shall attempt to state the fundamental claims of each position in a few brief propositions and then mention serious criticisms which have been directed at these positions.

1) Intuitionism: (i) "Good" denotes a non-natural (i.e. not perceived by one of the five senses) objective property which is simple and undefinable.
(ii) Good is known by a direct moral perception the way yellow is known by a direct visual perception.
(iii) Ethical statements are genuinely informative and can be known to be true or false.

Objections: (i) The intuitionist provides no ground for adjudicating between conflicting moral judgements each claimed to be based on a
direct moral intuition - surely not an uncommon happening, and precisely the situation in which a moral theory, as a means of resolution, becomes essential.

(ii) The invention of the notion of non-natural properties and of a faculty of moral intuition seems to be the result of trying to construct a moral analog to physical properties and perceptions, suggested perhaps by the fact that moral words such as "good" and "right" play the same grammatical role, i.e. they are predicates, as do physical property words such as "yellow" and "lemon-scented". But is this grammatical similarity enough to establish the analogy? There is virtually no disagreement over the application of physical property words whereas the application of moral terms is continually contested. The lack of agreement concerning our moral perceptions casts the whole intuitionist theory into doubt and leads us to question whether moral terms denote properties at all, and whether there is any such thing as a special faculty of moral intuition.

2) Emotivism: (i) Emotivists were concerned that we must look not at what ethical terms refer to but rather their function in language and life. What are ethical terms used for? Their conclusion was that "good" is not a predicate denoting anything; rather it is "an emotive sign expressing 'our attitude... and perhaps evoking similar attitudes in other persons, or inviting them to actions of one kind or another". Emotive meaning was held to be one of the essential components of the meaning of ethical terms: "the emotive meaning of a word is the power it acquires on account of its history in emotional situations, to evoke or directly express attitudes as distinct from describing or distinguishing them". (ii) It follows from what was said in (i) that ethical judgements cannot be either true or false: "We have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgements do not say anything. They are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry of pain or word of command is unverifiable - because they do not express genuine propositions."
(iii) Emotivists hold that disputes in ethics must be over questions of fact and could not be over questions of value. Consider this example. A condemns C's action and B praises it. Now the emotivist wants to say that if both A and B have undergone the same moral conditioning then their disagreement is most likely over something such as what, in fact, were C's motives in this case, what C's knowledge was of all the consequences of his act, what special circumstances preceded his action or perhaps over the consistency of this particular judgement of A's or B's with his other judgements (e.g. A might convince B that his holding this position regarding C would commit him to holding a certain position in another case which would run counter to B's other moral beliefs). If all questions of fact and consistency are resolved, however, and A and B are still opposed then, the emotivist claims, they stop arguing and resort to abusing one another. There is no way to show A's fundamental moral belief(s) superior to B's and hence any further argument is impossible.

Objections: (i) Ayer's emotivism is based on a) a verificationist theory of meaning and b) the open question argument. a) is, effectively, the claim that "a statement is held to be literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable" (a statement is analytic if it is necessarily true, e.g. "All bachelors are unmarried males"; a statement is empirically verifiable if its truth can be established empirically, e.g. "The cat is on the mat"). b) is an argument introduced by G.E. Moore which runs something like this: it may be thought that good can be identified with one or more natural properties such as pleasure or satisfaction of desire. That is, it may be thought that "X is good" means "X is pleasurable" or "X satisfies a desire". However, in all such cases it may be legitimately asked whether the natural property good has been identified with is itself good. Thus, one can always ask whether pleasure is good or whether satisfaction of desire is good. Ayer argued that the open question argument showed that "good" was not identical in meaning with any term denoting a natural (empirical)
property and hence that moral terms are not reducible to empirical terms. Now, if ethical statements are synthetic (i.e. not analytic) which they must be if they are to tell us anything substantial, and if ethical terms are not reducible to empirical terms, then, according to the verificationist theory of meaning, ethical statements are meaningless. This is Ayer's argument.

It may be objected however that both a) and b) are question-begging. For: 1) the statement "A statement is held to be literally meaningful if and only if it is analytic or empirically verifiable" is itself neither analytic nor empirically verifiable and 2) the open question argument will only work so long as the empirical term with which "good" is identified is not equivalent to it in meaning. If the correct term is found then it will become senseless to ask whether what the empirical term denotes is itself good.

Stevenson's emotivism is based on a psychological theory of meaning, i.e. a theory that holds that "meaning is the tendency or disposition of an expression to cause, or to be caused by, certain mental states or processes". Emotive meaning is distinguished from descriptive meaning according as its disposition is to produce or express a range of emotions or to produce or express cognitive mental processes.

This theory seems to be fundamentally unsatisfactory. Meaning is not a matter of psychological disposition but of linguistic rules. I do not learn dispositions (I acquire them) nor do I make mistakes about dispositions (I fail to have the right disposition) but I do both these things with meanings. (For example, it seems incorrect to say that on learning the meaning of the word "adamantine" I have learned a tendency to cause, or be caused by, a certain psychological process). Since the psychological theory of meaning is unsatisfactory in general it is a fortiori unsatisfactory in dealing with ethical terms. But let us examine why this is so in more detail.
Stevenson claimed that ethical terms combined emotive and descriptive meaning. Descriptive meaning, he allowed, was at least partially determined by linguistic rules; but a word's emotive meaning was wholly the word's power to evoke or express attitudes. It is as a result of their having emotive meaning that ethical terms could be neither true nor false: They could only succeed or fail to influence. But if we deny Stevenson's account of meaning and assert instead that meaning is a matter of linguistic rules then emotive terms must be seen as either completely meaningless (which is implausible) or as governed by linguistic rules. Ethical terms, therefore, to the extent that they are emotive must be either meaningless or fully rule-governed.

Thus, our criticism has removed the ground, according to either Ayer's or Stevenson's theories, for the central claims of emotivism - that ethical statements are neither true nor false and that their purpose is solely to create (causally) an influence.

3) Prescriptivism: Prescriptivism is generally regarded as a modification of emotivism. The function of moral terms is seen not to be the creation of an influence, the production of a psychological disposition to act in a certain way, but rather the prescription of courses of action or attitudes.

Moral terms have both descriptive and prescriptive meaning in varying degrees (e.g. "industrious", which is primarily a descriptive term, also has a commendatory connotation; "good", which is primarily a prescriptive term, also has, depending on the context, some descriptive meaning). Because of the descriptive and prescriptive meaning in moral terms, moral judgements are both universal and prescriptive. They are universal in the sense that if I say A is good because it is X, Y, and Z then if B is X, Y, and Z I must hold that it is good also; they are prescriptive in the sense that they are either commenatory (if they are value judgements) or imperatives (if they are "ought" statements). As in emotivism, the prescriptivist's moral terms, to the extent that they are prescriptive, denote nothing.
Unlike emotivism, however, this does not mean that prescriptive meaning is to be seen as a disposition to cause or be caused by certain psychological processes; instead, prescriptive meaning is, like descriptive meaning, rule-governed.

(iii) Moral argument is possible to some extent: the user of moral language can be shown that if he is going to use moral language then he must obey its logic, e.g. he must be prepared to universalize his moral judgements (assert that they hold in all relevantly similar cases) and be prepared to accept the singular imperatives that are entailed by universal imperatives. Thus if I assert that C ought to be hung for stealing a loaf of bread I am committed to the universal imperative "if X stole a loaf of bread then X should be hung" and the singular imperative "Let me be hung if I have stolen a loaf of bread".

(iv) Ethics provides a strictly formal framework within which decisions must be made. These decisions are based ultimately on the wants, attitudes, or inclinations of the agents. Provided that the formal criteria of universalizability and prescriptivity have been met then any given thing can be morally commended and any action morally prescribed, (e.g. if I believe that a certain Jew ought to be gassed for being a Jew then so long as I sincerely assent to the universal statement "All Jews ought to be gassed" and the singular imperative "If I am a Jew let me be gassed" then, according to the prescriptivist, I am free to make my moral judgement). Further, prescriptivists believe that anything can be wanted by man. That is, they do not believe that the concept of man rules out in advance any particular wants nor entails any particular want.

Objections: (i) While specifying the logical requirements of moral discourse goes a long way towards recreating what we call morality, it leaves out: a) the man who refuses to use moral discourse at all, b) the man who adopts what appears to be, on the prescriptivist's account, the defensible position that one ought always to do that which is one's own interest - and this appears to be the quintessence of immorality, c) the man who unflinchingly asserts that all Jews should
be gassed and who sincerely asserts to the imperative "Let me be gassed if I am a Jew". Like intuitionism and emotivism, prescriptivism seems to be unable to provide grounds for condemning particular positions which, if anything is to be called immoral, must surely be called immoral.

4) Descriptivism: Descriptivism (also called neo-naturalism) is a reaction against all three of the other theories we have examined so far. It is a reaction against emotivism and prescriptivism in so far as it holds that moral terms do denote certain objectively knowable properties. It is a reaction against intuitionism in that it holds that these properties are natural or empirical properties.

(ii) In particular, descriptivists adopt the following three claims in opposition to prescriptivists: a) morality is not purely formal, it does have some content; b) it is not always consistent to deny the application of the value terms after a description has been given: i.e. a description may be sufficient to entail a value term ("is" can imply "ought"); c) not anything whatsoever can be wanted: if we are prepared to call something a human then we must associate certain wants with it and deny it certain others.

(iii) In accordance with (ii) c), morality is seen as being founded in human wants and in concern for others' interests. "The relevance of considerations as to the welfare of human beings cannot, in the context of moral debate, be denied" and this is so "simply because of what 'moral' means".

Objections: (i) Which natural properties are ethical terms to be attached to? Which wants are to be taken as fundamental and what grounds are to be adduced for excluding the rest? What constitutes human welfare? Contrary to those who maintain (without talking specifics) that "the notion of 'the welfare' of human beings has, as one might put it, a perfectly clear and determinate core or centre" it might be argued that no "clear and determinate core" can be indisputably asserted
which is not so general as to be worthless in coming to any particular decision.

(ii) The very fact that the descriptivist wants to say that being moral means taking human welfare into account makes even more pointed the question "Why should I be moral?"

Summary: After all is said and done the complex and extensive debate found in these theories can be focused in two central and recurrent questions:

1) Are values reducible to facts? Regarding this question, the intuitionist, the emotivist, and the prescriptivist stand together against the descriptivist. The intuitionist insures the separation of empirical facts and values by unabashedly making them ontologically distinct (natural and non-natural properties); the emotivist and prescriptivist do effectively the same thing by the introduction of the two irreducible types of meaning. The descriptivist denies the separation of facts and values, arguing that morality must be seen as promoting human welfare where at least in part the concept of human welfare is necessarily connected with certain natural properties.

2) Is the good or the right objectively knowable or is it ultimately a matter of individual attitudes and wants? Here the intuitionist and the descriptivist stand together (as cognitivists) against the emotivist and the prescriptivist (as non-cognitivists). The former regard values as properties which are open to public inspection and hence they can speak of ethical statements as true or false; the latter regard values as expressions of individuals' attitudes and hence there is no way for ethical statements to be true or false.

The approach we have been taking in this section seems to end in a dilemma concerning each of these questions. In the case of the first question, either we accept a reduction of value to fact, in which case the particular reduction must be justified (a seemingly hopeless task), or else we deny the possibility of the reduction, in which case the purely formal characteristics of morality
appear inadequate to justify doing one thing and reject doing another. In the case of the second question either we accept that goodness is objectively knowable in which case we must ask how we get this objective knowledge (in the intuitionist's case through moral intuitions concerning which disagreement is rampant; in the descriptivist's case through a definition of "human welfare" concerning which disagreement is also rampant), or we accept that moral judgements are ultimately based on purely personal attitudes and inclinations and give up any hope of having them carry more than the force of an individual expression of feeling.

4. The Second Approach

Our first approach has lead us to a pair of dilemmas for which solutions are not readily apparent. This stalemate suggests looking at the second approach in the hope that it will throw a different light on the subject. The second approach involves looking at the question "How should we act?" via the question "What is a reason for action?" Prior to this question we must ask "What is a reason?" 15

What is to count as a reason? I should like to suggest, borrowing an idea from J.S. Mill, 16 that a reason is a consideration capable of determining the intellect (or the mind) in favour of one thing (belief, course of action, or whatever) over another. Obviously "intellect" or "mind" is the key term here. Considerations which are capable of determining any particular man's intellect may be of the logically shoddiest, empirically most unsubstantiated or morally most disreputable kind; consequently, this view seems to be totally subjectivistic and hence unacceptable. But "mind" need not be understood solely in an individual sense and I would argue against interpreting it thus. It can also be interpreted in the sense of collective mind: by "collective mind" I mean, though anything but an imprecise formulation is impossible, the collection of thoughts and writings of the human race as found objectified in social practices, religions, procedures and systems of acquiring knowledge,
normative language, etc. In short, the collective mind is the continuing communal dialogue that constitutes human mental life as opposed to individual human mental life.

To avoid ambiguity, we must pause here and try to set straight the various senses in which "reason" is used and the senses in which I intend to use it. "Reason" is used in the following: 1) A reason is a consideration capable of determining at least one mind. Here we must distinguish a) instances where we say "he has his reasons" - instances where we do not feel the force of the considerations but are fully prepared to accept the individual character of the considerations given because they are not intended to convince or persuade anyone else; b) instances where we say "he gave his reasons but they were completely beside the point" - instances where as in a) we do not see the force of the reasons and indeed only call them reasons because they were intended as considerations which would convince or persuade us.

2) A reason is a consideration capable of determining the collective mind. Here, we must distinguish a) considerations which are capable of determining the collective mind provided certain circumstances hold (put in a slightly different way, we might say that in order for these considerations not to be sufficient to determine the collective mind special considerations must be indicated; for example, the avoidance of lying is one such reason for acting: lying is always wrong unless certain overriding considerations can be demonstrated such as, for instance, that someone's life would be saved if a lie were told); b) considerations which are, in fact, logically sufficient to determine the collective mind. In this sense, a reason is the result of a balanced consideration of all the relevant reasons of the sort specified in 2 a) and of all the relevant factors.

There are various ways of handling this diversity of senses terminologically; one could call 1 a) and b) instances of giving reasons and call
2 a) prima facie good reasons and 3 b) good reasons. However, the introduction of the term "good" here leads, I think, only to further confusion. I prefer to deny 1 a) and b) the status of reasons at all and speak of private considerations (1 a)) and considerations intended as reasons (1 b)); 2 a) then I shall call prima facie reasons and 2 b) reasons. (Note: what are reasons for doing X or believing X at one time may cease to be so at a later time.)

It may be objected that this connection of reason to collective mind is still too subjective, that if something is to be a reason some reference must be made to the way things are in "reality". What I want to suggest, however, is that our conception of reality does not extend beyond our ability to give reasons. If I say that a stick, whose image I see refracted through the waters of a pond, is not "really" bent, I mean that the contradictory evidence of our tactile and visual senses is resolved through references to a reason-giving structure which serves here as the "reality" in comparison with which our interpretations of the phenomenon either fit or do not fit. Similarly if I say someone's action was not "really" bad, I am claiming that some feature of his action was such that when compared with what constitute reasons for action being bad he is exculpated. Any particular phenomenon or action may be assimilated to general reason-giving structures in standard ways and these structures may again be referred to even more general structures. But, eventually, the process must end and beyond this there can be no talk of reality - physical or moral. The reason-giving structures along with particular results and accepted methods of extending and modifying the structures constitute reality; it makes no sense talk about what lies beyond them. Particular portions of these reason-giving structures may be modified in allowable ways and hence it makes sense to question particulars, to ask "Is this how it really is?". But it makes no sense to ask in general, of the whole reason-giving edifice "Is this how things really are?"

What is the individual's relation to the collective mind? The individual partakes in the collective mind via the medium of language;
but the language is not his to do what he wants with: it is greater than he is and he can only affect small changes in it and hence in the collective mind. Accordingly, there is no such thing as a reason given and justified by an individual himself. The individual has no power to sanction anything as a reason unless he is speaking in the name of the collective mind: whatever the individual puts forward as a reason must be tested by reference to the accepted standards, by being aired in the communal dialogue, etc.

These claims may be illustrated and supported by examples from the areas of science and ethics. The language and methodology of science has been built up slowly and painstakingly over hundreds of years. An individual wanting to present a rational account of the occurrence of an event has no choice but to present his account in the scientific language in which he has learned to think and which, to a large extent, determines his view of what the world is like. Imagine, for instance, an individual who maintained that the aurora borealis occurred because birds migrate. What would we make of this? Well, if we assumed that this was a serious hypothesis, we would ask him what he saw the connection between the aurora and migration to be and would set up experiments to validate or invalidate this connection. If we invalidated his hypothesis using standard scientific techniques, and yet if he refused to give it up, we would ask him what he meant by "because" when he said that the aurora occurred because birds migrate. Failing a reasonable reply, "reasonable" of course in an accepted and historically conditioned sense, we could only conclude that he did not understand what he was saying or that he was crazy.

Insofar as ethics is a rational activity the same remarks apply. The individual who uses ethical language is dependent upon a tradition and an established body of reasons for action and can put forward a consideration as a reason for action only if it fits into this existing complex in an acceptable way. Consider, for example, an individual who maintained that torturing babies was right. How would we respond to this? Initially we would probably question him to see if he held that this was so on the basis of some more general principle such as that causing pain is always right.
If he did not hold some such general principle we would investigate his other uses of "right" and try to see if he was using it inconsistently in this case. If he did hold some such general principle again we would try to see if it was inconsistent with other general ethical principles that he held; but if it was not, i.e. if he held no principles prohibiting gratuitous violence, harming the innocent, or harming the defenceless, and held no principles encouraging decency, kindness to the helpless, and so on, principles which would contradict the principle invoked to defend torturing babies, then we would say that he did not understand ethical language or, if his assertions were borne out in his behaviour, that he was deranged.

These two examples clarify, I hope, the relation of the individual to the collective mind and illustrate the central point that an individual cannot, save insofar as he is speaking as a voice of the collective mind, sanction something as a reason.

Having looked so far in this section at 1) what counts as a reason, 2) the relation of reason and reality and 3) the relation of the individual to the collective mind, let us now examine how the account we have been developing here deals with four further subjects: 1) the problem of moral skepticism; 2) the problem of how to go about determining what to do in particular situations; 3) the relation of self-interested or prudential reasons for action to moral or non-prudential reasons for action; and 4) what the approach developed here has to say about the four theories discussed in section 3.

1) The moral skeptic is one who, whenever a moral theory is presented to him, questions the grounds of its first principles and demands to know why, according to it, he ought to follow its prescriptions, why he ought to be moral. In order to answer the moral skeptic it is necessary to recall some of the remarks that were made about the relation of reason and reality. What I argued could be expressed by saying that the collective mind creates moral reality or moral
reasons for action (I want to say that it creates physical reality as well). The proposition "the collective mind creates moral reality" is a metaphorical expression for the following effective conclusions:

a) Moral reasoning comes to an end and there is no point in asking whether this stopping point is adequate for there is nothing beyond by which adequacy can be determined. This does not mean that any starting point is as good as another in moral reasoning, for there is only one collective mind and it determines the first principles of moral reasoning. What the collective mind has posited as first principles, as fundamental reasons for action, is contingent (they could have been otherwise); what is not contingent is that for there to be reasons for action at all some connection between reasons for action and something else, such as human wants, had to be made and that once this connection was made, while it provides the grounds on which to question other reasons for action, it itself remains unquestionable. Thus the moral skeptic's refusal to accept any first principles must be dismissed as a failure to understand the nature of rational endeavour.

b) The question "why ought I to be moral?" is either self-answering or meaningless; for, it is of the form "why ought I to do what I ought to do?" where either a) the first "ought" means the same as the second, in which case it is self-answering or b) some additional sense is intended for the first "ought" in which case, since this additional sense is, ex hypothesi, not available (the giving of reasons has come to an end) the question is meaningless. The skeptic may try to push on and ask why he ought to be rational but surely if he does this he has overstepped himself; asking for reasons for giving reasons is self-evidently a futile pastime.

2) Can the account we have been developing here tell us how to go about determining what to do in particular, concrete situations. How are we to decide amongst the plethora of normative moral theories and the Babel of moral advisors? If there are fundamental reasons for action
which are contingent yet, in the sense we have made out, non-contingent, how are we to identify them?

To this last question the account we have been developing here provides a somewhat paradoxical answer. It maintains that the project of trying to identify once and for all a fixed set of reasons for action (a moral code) is misguided; yet it also maintains that there is general agreement concerning fundamental reasons for action (for instance, gratuitous infliction of pain, lying, benefiting at other's expense are universally considered, at least prima facie, to be wrong). No particular value is unquestionable. However, it can only be rationally questioned within the context of moral discourse, within the context of considerations capable of determining the collective mind. In searching for ethical certainty we can only shift the burden of proving principles from one principle to another for so long. Finally, we must be satisfied and take one principle or another without further "proof". Indeed, when we take off our philosophical spectacles and look around us, we find that there is a fundamental agreement in normative standards. In fact this agreement is one of the conditions of community and communication. "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements."¹⁹

Lest it be thought that the claim that there is fundamental agreement in normative standards is blatantly contrary to the facts, let us examine what generally goes by the name of moral argument to see how much of it really involves dispute over basic reasons for action. In a "moral argument", the following may be the case:
1) there may be a dispute over factual information; 2) each of the disputants may hold the same fundamental value claims but one of them may have made an incorrect inference to a particular conclusion; 3) one of the parties may be shown to hold directly incompatible moral beliefs; 4) one of the parties may come to be convinced that adopting
a particular moral conclusion will in fact lead to consequences which are incompatible with certain other of his moral beliefs - there is a failure to have reasoned sufficiently (number 4 is really a combination of 1, 2 and 3); 5) the parties may hold irreducibly dissimilar beliefs. In this last situation we must say either that there is a consideration of the sort 1 - 4 which the parties are not capable of detecting or that one (or both) of the parties does not properly understand the use of moral discourse or is flawed in his participation in the collective mind. Thus, most of what is commonly called "moral argument" does not involve dispute over fundamental reasons for action but rather disagreement over relevant factual information, implications of value claims, etc.

Given on the one hand that moral argument is an incredibly complex process of weighing a multitude of factors, a process in which no two cases may ever appear quite alike, and on the other that there is a firm foundation of shared convictions, how do we decide which principles to appeal to in resolving a particular moral dispute?

We have, as a formal embodiment of ethical concepts, the law. (I have in mind here only the law of persons which does tend to reflect fairly accurately our ethical beliefs.) Thus, in determining what to do in a particular case we may always initially consider whether what we propose contravenes an existing law or contradicts the spirit and general principles that underlie the law. The law, of course, if not sufficient to determine what we ought to do: it may not be just or it may not be extendable to the case at hand. In either of these cases some reference to more general and fundamental ethical principles and possibly to whatever picture is held of the nature of man required. These fundamental ethical principles do not have to be sought: they are all around us, embedded in our normative language, our activities, our institutions, our way of life.

In seeking for principles to appeal to in deciding any particular moral issue, therefore, we should take two steps: 1) we should
consult the law, as that institution which most directly attempts to formally embody our ethical principles and 2) since 1) is never sufficient we must consult the general ethical principles that are asssented to by the collective mind as reasons for action.

3) What does the "reasons for action" account have to say about the relation of self-interested or prudential to moral or non-prudential reasons? Well, it certainly wants to deny that the latter are reducible to the former; yet it does not dismiss the validity or force of the former either. Again, what is required in deciding which is to take precedence in any particular case is an examination of the intricate web of reasons for action which constitutes the ethical portion of the collective mind. There are no pat formulae or principles which will provide answers to all cases, but nevertheless there is a surprising degree of agreement as to when and to what extent self-interested or moral reasons hold sway. And, in many cases, of course, rather than conflicting they reinforce each other - for instance, it is frequently in one's best interests to behave morally. The important points to note are: 1) that there are both self-interested and moral reasons for action, and 2) that a balance is struck between them by the collective mind.

4) What can we now say about the four approaches we considered earlier? 1) Intuitionism posits an objective moral reality which we are prepared to accept. However, it then goes on and insists that this reality must, if it is to be objective, be independent of any and all human judgements and this move introduces all the epistemological problems that attend the similar theory of physical reality. How can a mind ever come to know this external reality with certainty? Aside from this difficulty, though, which can be easily remedied by dropping the insistence that moral reality be independent and arguing as we have done that it is a creation of the collective mind, we find intuitionism acceptable.
2) Emotivism and Prescriptivism dispose of the problem of non-natural properties and the connected epistemological worries but at the cost, in the case of emotivism, of banishing reason from ethics (ethical terms are, ultimately, just expressions of attitude or psychological tools for manipulating attitudes) and, in the case of prescriptivism, of reducing the role of reason in ethics to a purely formal one (the user of ethical terms must, according to the prescriptivist, recognize their universality and prescriptivity). The present account re-introduces reason both formally and substantively - reasons for actions are precisely those that are accepted, that do determine the collective mind, as we have defined it above. Thus we would say qualifiedly that it is the case that not anything whatever can be called good. In two senses, however, the prescriptivist is right in saying that anything can be called good: a) When "good" is used as it is occasionally, as a purely emotive term - like "zowie!" or "neato!". Here a demand for reasons is not expected, but here also "good" is not functioning as a normative term. To claim that "good" or moral terms function exclusively in this emotive way would be to obliterate the definite, if not precise, distinction between taste (spontaneous application) and morality. 
b) In the sense that while "good", when used by an individual, can only be used as a moral term if publicly sanctioned reasons can be adduced, there appears to be no limit, other than logical consistency, on what can be sanctioned by the collective mind.

3) Descriptivism tries to re-introduce reason into ethics by suggesting some necessary connection between giving reasons and fundamental wants or human welfare. But the grounds of this connection are not made clear. There is no necessary connection between the concept of reasons for action and the concept of human wants or welfare (i.e. the connection is not analytic). Wants may provide reasons for action if they are accepted by the collective mind as reasons, and indeed with certain restrictions they have been. This connection is contingent in the sense that it could have been different (with disastrous consequences for mankind) but its contingency must
be clarified in two important ways: a) If there were to be reasons for action at all some connection had to be made - if not between reasons for action and wants then between reasons for actions and something else.
b) Given the connection that has been made between reasons for action and wants, consideration for others, and so on, this connection cannot be questioned for there are no grounds on which to call it, in all its aspects, into question.

In this section I have tried to provide an account of what constitutes justification in ethics through a discussion of what counts as a reason for action. Suggesting that a reason is a consideration capable of determining the collective mind, where collective mind is understood to mean human mental life in an historical sense - as objectified in social practices, procedures and systems of acquiring knowledge (science), religions, normative and scientific language, etc., I have argued that what we should do is what the collective mind specifies. While what the collective mind advocates will not always be unambiguous, it does provide a "determinate core" of moral principles. Unquestionably, conflicts occur but the capacity to resolve them is part of what constitutes a moral community. We must use the tools we are given: to reject the principles and procedures of our predecessors is to reject all we have to work with. A rational decision can be made only by referring to accepted principles and procedures. Resolving the conflicts and contradictions inherent in these principles and procedures as new situations arise requires a commitment to some of them which cannot be questioned. The paradox of thinking is that it is in its nature to question and yet even to question it must make suppositions which are not open to question.
PART II

In this part of the paper, I should like to look critically at some of the arguments which have been put forward regarding the question of our moral relation to future generations. (So far as I know, I have, in the course of the study, reviewed all that has been published on the subject of our obligations to future generations. I have chosen to discuss here some of the most interesting and cogent of the arguments found in the literature.)

First, I shall discuss in general terms how this question has been treated and how this treatment fits into the approach developed at the end of the preceding part of the paper. Then I shall deal, in succession, with a number of authors whose arguments can be placed into one or another of two general classes. Finally, I shall summarize the results of this part.

1. Rights, Obligations and Reasons for Action

Virtually all the discussions of the moral relation between ourselves and future generations have been expressed in one type of terminology: the jargon of rights and obligations. Do future generations have rights? Do we have obligations to future generations? These are the sorts of questions that are asked. Unfortunately, it is all too rarely asked, in a critical and searching way, "What is a right?" or "How do we come to have rights and obligations?" I say that this is unfortunate because the superficial consideration of these questions has led to some pseudo-problems gaining an undue importance and to the faulty use of analogical argument. The problem of our moral relation to future generations, far from being just another rights issue, is perhaps the ultimate question for morality. For here there can be no question of simply rationalizing self-interest: in a clear sense we stand neither to gain nor to lose from our treatment of future generations. Consequently, any attempt to answer our question without a serious examination of the foundation of rights and obligations must necessarily be futile.
So far, the dispute has centered around one question: how can non-existent entities, i.e. future generations, have rights, and if they cannot have rights, how can it be that we have obligations to them? Some people see these questions as being effectively equivalent because they feel that every right has a corresponding obligation and vice versa. Others think this is simply false, for it may be argued that we have obligations not to damage buildings, property, etc. and yet, that buildings and property do not have rights. In response, however, we may point out that the obligation is not really to the building, the property, or whatever, but rather to those whose interests would be harmed through the damaging of the building or the property. And these people, it may be said, do have rights which would be violated if the building or property was damaged. This does not resolve the dispute as to whether rights do always correspond to obligations, and vice versa, but it removes one of the more obvious objections to their non-correspondence. This question will arise again.

There seems to be no dispute, however, that if future generations have rights then we have obligations to respect them because these rights, presumably, will be claims against us. The dispute seems only to arise when we deny that future generations have rights and yet try to argue that we have an obligation to take their interests into account. This latter position is important because many find it impossible to conceive of future generations, as now non-existent, having rights. Hence, in trying to account for their intuitive feelings of responsibility, they are forced to reject the symmetry between rights and obligations and claim that we may have obligations to future generations without their having rights. The question of whether future generations have rights proves to be a convenient one over which to divide the arguments which have been presented (as opposed to the question of whether we have obligations to them since both sides in the dispute over the symmetry of rights and obligations would agree to this). Consequently, in the next two sections I shall deal, in turn, with the arguments which fall into each of these divisions. First, with those who argue that future generations do have
rights, or at least that it makes sense to speak of them having rights, and second with those who argue that we have obligations which account for our feelings of responsibility to future generations without implying that they have rights.

Before considering these arguments, though, can we place all this talk about rights and obligations into our account of reasons for action? As we have noted, much current perplexity stems from the difficulty of attributing rights to non-existent entities. Why does this puzzlement arise? It seems to be based on an ontological confusion: rights are spoken of as things people have, as attributes of persons - almost as one might speak of abilities or character traits. The problem then becomes: how can the rights of a person extend beyond the period of that person's lifetime? For, it is clearly absurd to talk of attributes, like abilities or character traits, extending beyond the duration of the person who possesses them. Yet, if the rights of future generations are to be at all efficacious in influencing our decisions, they must exist now. Thus the dilemma poses itself: on the one hand, with rights conceived as personal attributes, it seems inappropriate to speak of the rights of a person existing when the person does not, and on the other hand unless future generations' rights exist now they cannot be of use in securing any consideration for them.

I think the problem here lies with conceiving rights after the fashion of attributes. This conception is not generally made explicit, but then rarely is any talk of rights. It seems to find its genesis in eighteenth century talk of natural rights of man, inalienable rights of man, and so on. Talk like this has propagated itself in legal and social philosophy ever since (cf. the Ontario code of human rights). But what does it really mean to say that a man has a right? Surely we are not saying something like we are when we say that he has an ability or a character trait: rather we are saying that there is a prima facie reason for treating him in a certain way. Thus if A has a right to liberty, this is to say no more than that there is a prima facie reason not to interfere
with A's liberty. Now clearly there is no ontological difficulty in maintaining that there could be reasons for acting on behalf of persons who are not yet alive (or for that matter, on behalf of those who are dead). Whether there are such reasons is precisely what we have to determine.

Thus, I should like to say that rights, and also obligations, are more fundamentally reasons for action or at least, since I shall later talk of obligations to future generations myself, that they ought initially to be understood in this sense. Seen this way, what appears to be the central difficulty so far in the discussion of our moral relation to future generations disappears. Now we are left only with this problem: given that there are reasons for treating persons now alive in certain ways, what reasons are there for treating future generations in similar or different ways? We shall return to this question after we have considered what others have had to say on the subject.

2. Future Generations with Rights

As will be recalled, we decided to divide current arguments on the subject into two classes: those that argue that future generations do have rights, and those that do not, but argue that we have some other obligation which requires consideration of future generations' interests. In this section we shall deal with arguments of the first sort. Into this division I have placed the arguments of J. Feinberg in "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations", M.P. Golding in "Obligations to Future Generations" and D. Callahan in "What Obligations Do We Have to Future Generations?". I shall consider each of these articles in turn.

Feinberg claims to be engaged in the purely conceptual task of determining whether we can sensibly talk about the rights of future generations, whether it makes sense to attribute rights to future generations. According to him, if this makes sense then the substantive moral question of whether they do have rights is a further question, and
one he does not intend to expressly consider. Now, before going any further, I should like to register a disagreement: in the case of most predicates, it is reasonable to separate the conceptual question of whether it makes sense to speak of them applying from the existential question of whether they in fact do (e.g. consider these three questions: 1) can we speak of members of future generations all being under five feet tall? answer: yes; 2) can we speak of the cube roots of all numbers less than fifteen being under five feet tall? answer: no; 3) is it the case that all members of future generations will be under five feet tall? answer: no (provided there are no radical genetic alterations). In the case of rights, however, I do not think we can separate these questions (which perhaps emphasizes the fact that rights ought not to be talked of as attributes of persons). Surely once we decide that women, or animals, or whatever, fall within the bounds of our concepts of "having rights" then we have allowed that they do have rights - just which rights we may not yet be certain; but that they do have rights must surely be admitted. I do not wish to pursue this question any further here. Rather, I should like to put the onus on Feinberg to provide one instance (which he does not do in his article) where we may, with conceptual propriety, speak of A as having rights and yet deny that A, in fact, does so.

The rest of Feinberg's article still interests us, in fact even more so now, because we have been arguing that more significance attaches to his purely conceptual task than he believed. What then is his argument for asserting that it does make sense to speak of future generations having rights? Feinberg says that his method will be to examine:

the most familiar and unproblematic instances of rights, note their most salient characteristics, and then compare the borderline cases with them, measuring as closely as possible the points of similarity and difference. In the end, the way we classify the borderline cases may depend on whether we are more impressed with the similarities or the differences between them and the cases in which we have the most confidence.
Following this procedure, he examines, in turn, animals, vegetables, whole species, dead persons, human vegetables, fetuses and future generations, in order to establish which of these we can speak of as having rights. In his first and longest section dealing with animals, he establishes two major results: 1) being able to claim rights is not a necessary condition for having rights - rights can be claimed by proxies or agents; 2) having interests is a necessary condition for having rights (he does not make it clear whether he means this to be a sufficient condition for the applicability of the concept "rights" as well, though I presume this to be the case for otherwise the rest of his argument is pointless). He then goes on and applies this "interest principle" to the other cases he considers. Arriving at the cases of fetuses and future generations, however, we find the interest principle discarded, though as I noted, its sufficiency for establishing rights was never really asserted. Feinberg now says that:

unborn children are among the sorts of beings of whom possession of rights can meaningfully be predicated, even though they are (temporarily) incapable of having interests, because their future interests can be protected now, and it does make sense to protect a potential interest even before it has grown into actuality.

Fetuses, therefore, he admits, have no interests - saying this is so only "temporarily" is just confusing: when "they" do have interests they are no longer fetuses. Not only is the interest principle discarded, but nothing seems to be put in its place; unless we are now to consider a possessor of whatever "it makes sense to protect" a possessor of rights. But this is surely not what Feinberg intends.

I mention his discussion of fetuses because he seems to think that the argument there carries over to the case of future generations. I say
"seems" because his argument is dreadfully unclear. Of future generations, he says:

whoever these human beings may turn out to be, and whatever they might reasonably be expected to be like, they will have interests that we can affect, for better or worse, right now. That much we can and do know about them. The identity of the owners of these interests is now necessarily obscure, but the fact of their interest-ownership is crystal clear, and that is all that is necessary to certify the coherence of present talk about rights.

Now the principle seems to be not "having interests is a sufficient condition for the concept of rights to be sensibly applied" nor "being the possessor of something which it makes sense to protect is a sufficient condition for the concept of rights to be sensibly applied" but "being something that we know will have interests in the future that can be affected now is a sufficient condition for the concept of rights to be sensibly applied". This, however, is just an assertion of what is at question. Feinberg's method has turned into a game of simply inventing principles to attribute rights to whatever sorts of things he happens to feel it makes sense to speak of having rights. This is completely unacceptable and, hence, I conclude that Feinberg offers no persuasive arguments for believing that future generations are the possessors of rights which entitle them to claims against us now.

The Golding and Callahan papers are not unconnected: Callahan acknowledges his indebtedness to Golding and, in some respects, his article can be seen as supplementing Golding's. On account of this dependency, I shall discuss Golding's paper first. Golding, while speaking mostly of our obligations to future generations, does believe "that future generations now have claims against us and that they are the possessors of presumptive rights". 8 (Golding seems to be of the school, though he never commits himself, which maintains that rights and obligations are fully symmetrical). What are the grounds of our obligations to future generations which confer these rights upon them?
Golding's account revolves around the concepts of social ideal and of moral community. He defines "social ideal" as "a conception of the good life for man" (later Golding qualifies this by contrasting a social ideal with a personal ideal, an ideal maintained by an individual for himself but not necessarily extended to apply to all others; a social ideal is "a conception of the good life for individuals characterized in the broadest terms, namely, as human") and moral community as those whose claims entitle them to receive what is claimed from someone else in the same group (i.e. A is a member of B's moral community if A's claim entitles him to receive what is claimed from B). According to Golding, moral communities are established in a number of ways: 1) by an explicit contract; 2) by "a social arrangement in which each member derives benefits from the efforts of other members"; 3) by a social ideal extending to include certain others' good. Golding expands on the connection between the notions of obligation, social ideal and moral community thus: if recognizing another's claim is to be an obligation on my part, it requires "that I acknowledge this (the other's) good as a good, that his good is a good-to-me. Once I have made this step I cannot in conscience deny the pertinence of his demand...". The conception of good, of course, by reference to which I consider the other's good is the social ideal which I have adopted; it is to those to whom it applies that I am obliged, who belong to my moral community.

Clearly the first two ways of establishing moral communities are inappropriate in the case of future generations. Relevance of our social ideal, therefore, appears to be the only way in which it makes sense to speak of future generations being included in our moral community. Golding concludes, consequently, that "Future generations are members of our moral community because, and insofar as, our social ideal is relevant to them, given what they are and their conditions of life." From this conclusion Golding goes on to indicate roughly how he sees our social ideal applying to future generations and hence what obligations he sees us as having. This need not concern us at present, however. What we are concerned with here is the argument for the existence of an obligation.
Is Golding's argument conclusive? I think that he is vaguely moving in the right direction, i.e. away from the jargon of rights and obligations and towards the reasons for action approach, but that a number of fundamental features of his argument are unsatisfactory. He fails to develop his notion of social ideal in a convincing manner and this leaves his account smacking of relativism. He seems to suggest that each individual can have a social ideal of his own (as distinct from his personal ideal). What is to stop an individual or a group from adopting a rational egoist social ideal and maintaining that the individual or the group ought only to look out for its own good? (This would leave future generations out in the cold.) If two individuals or groups have conflicting social ideals how are we to decide between them? Golding says that future generations are part of our moral community to the extent that our social ideal is relevant to them. Who is to count as the "us" here? Presumably whatever group is making decisions with regard to future generations (e.g. everyone of this generation, the people of one country, the administrators of one country). But it is not at all clear that such a group will have a universal social ideal and indeed in the future generations' case this is precisely the problem: there are conflicting opinions and we want to know how to decide among them. Golding seems to be making the true but unhelpful claim that we ought to do what we believe we ought to do. (Any attempt to break this deadlock by adopting a principle such as majority rule will require justification.) Thus, Golding's account leaves us with an unrestricted relativism and no suggestion as to what to do.

I say that Golding is moving in the right direction because I think his notions of social ideal and moral community can be extended, without undue violence, to my notions of reasons for action and collective mind. My account, though, excludes the relativism that Golding ends up in; for according to my account an individual cannot supply his own reasons for actions nor can any group, save insofar as they represent the collective mind. The possibility of a multitude of irreconcilably conflicting moral communities and unresolvably conflicting social ideals thus does not arise.
Callahan accepts Golding's basic concepts of social ideal and moral community and works from these. Concerning the basic argument for the existence of an obligation to future generations, which is all we are concerned with here, Callahan sees his argument supplementing Golding's in two ways: 1) Perhaps scenting Golding's relativism he thinks we should be careful to understand by "our moral community" the "whole human community". Otherwise, he feels, the stage is set for all sorts of exclusions (along the lines of the exclusion of blacks from the European moral community, the tangible result of which was slavery). 2) We incur an obligation to future generations in a way other than through our social ideal extending to them. We are in debt to our parents and to the society in which we were born for having brought us into the world and sustaining us. "From our obligation to the past stems our obligation to the future...we owe to those coming after us at least what we ourselves were given by those who came before us: the possibility of life and survival." 15

To this supplementation I should like to reply as follows: 1) In response to 1) above: by widening the concept of moral community to include the whole human community Callahan brings down on his head the same problem we have seen with Golding. If by human community he means all those alive today, then he cannot speak of this community's social ideal without invoking some further principle to determine which of the many conflicting moral positions that are held by individuals and groups of this human community are to be accepted. 2) In response to 2) above, a number of points may be made: a) Callahan speaks of us having incurred a debt to our parents and of having an obligation to future generations simply because our parents brought us into existence and sustained us when we were young. But why should we be double-debted? Why is our debt to our parents not the only debt here? Why and how does an obligation to the future "stem" from one to the past? Callahan may want to argue that the debt is to our children because we cannot pay our parents back directly but only indirectly through raising our children in the way we were raised, but
this strikes me as simply false: we can pay our parents back through gratitude, love and assistance in their old age.
b) It can be argued that in having a child one accepts the obligation to maintain and look after it and therefore the child, rather than incurring a debt, is receiving his due. As for being brought into existence — I think it may be senseless to talk about being obligated to someone for that (obliged maybe, but not obligated).
c) The symmetry between the debts we have incurred to the past and the obligations we are asked to consider to the future is not complete. In the past, direct control or influence was limited almost exclusively to the immediately following generation. For instance, nothing that was done a hundred generations ago does directly influence us today (we experience only the indirect effects handed down through the generations) whereas were we to dispose of nuclear wastes and make an error in our calculations so that in a hundred generations a catastrophe occurred, we would be seen as responsible. Thus our debts to the past may not be adequate to generate the obligations we are asked to take on for the future.

3. Future Generations Without Rights

We have considered a number of approaches which have tried to establish that future generations do have rights. Over against these arguments there are those who maintain either that it is simply not necessary to talk about the rights of future generations in order to settle our moral relation to them or that as well as its not being necessary to do so it is also not terribly plausible. Again, I shall discuss the arguments of three authors: E. Delattre's "Rights, Responsibilities, and Future Persons", J. Rawls' chapter entitled "The Problem of Justice Between Generations" in his book A Theory of Justice, and D. Clayton Hubin's criticism and modification of J. Rawls' argument in "Justice and Future Generations".
Delattre maintains both the negative thesis that it is not altogether plausible to attribute rights to future generations and the positive thesis that it is not necessary to do so in order to establish obligations on our part which will take the interests of future generations into account. The negative thesis is established on the following grounds: 1) either the right to existence or existence itself is a prerequisite for other rights; 2) the argument for a right to existence leads to absurd consequences. Number 2) is supported as follows: we can speak of the person who would have arisen from X’s impregnation of Y at time T and of the person who would have arisen from Z’s impregnation of Y at time T. Each of these persons has, if there is a right to existence, a right to come into existence. Thus, we are obliged to bring both into existence; however bringing one into existence excludes the possibility of bringing the other into existence. Hence, if there is a right to existence we are obliged to do the impossible.

There is obviously room for debate here but I should like to move on and consider Delattre’s positive thesis which is really of more interest to us. What he argues is that we now accept responsibilities which are not directed to some person or persons (other than oneself) and he hopes to persuade us that we have responsibilities concerning future generations which are analogous to such non-directed responsibilities. He gives two examples of responsibilities which we now accept which do not require persons to whom we are responsible: 1) a person notices a farmhouse beginning to burn which he does not know to be occupied nor to be unoccupied; 2) a person leaving a sinking ship notices a compartment, which again he does not know to be occupied nor to be unoccupied, whose occupants (if there be any) have not responded to the emergency. In each of these cases, we feel that the person involved is responsible for taking steps to discover whether there are persons in danger and if this be the case to warn them. The point of the examples is to show that responsibilities can be generated simply by the possible existence of persons and not by
their actual existence. Delattre concludes:

If we are willing to grant the sort of possibility we have discussed as sufficient for obligation in the present, we ought, I think, to grant its application for the future. Given this argument, even if we deny rights to future persons and deny responsibilities directed to them, our responsibilities in ecology will not be significantly affected.19

It is important to note that Delattre's argument is an analogical one. If differences can be shown between the cases given as examples and the case of future generations then the argument, as it stands, must be discarded for Delattre has not exhibited the ground for responsibility in the different cases. I think that there is a difference between these cases; that is, I think a principle can be formulated which will allow for responsibility in the examples Delattre has given yet rule it out in the case of future generations. Since his argument is strictly analogical Delattre has no grounds on which to reject the principle. The principle is: 1) we only have obligations to actually existing persons; and 2) we have obligations to act as if actual persons were involved when our knowledge of whether they are in fact involved is uncertain. This principle clearly accounts for our responsibility in the example Delattre gives yet it equally clearly does not entail responsibilities to future generations. Delattre's analogical argument is not powerful enough to reject this principle and hence I conclude that his argument is inadequate.

J. Rawls' account is part of the much larger project of developing a full theory of justice. This theory is, of course, far too complex to be sketched in even the briefest manner here. I shall present only those details I see as necessary in order to comprehend his position regarding future generations. Rawls sees all principles of justice as being those which would be chosen from behind a "veil of ignorance". That is, one considers only those principles which would be chosen by individuals abstracted from all the particulars of their existences - their social positions, their intelligence, abilities, place of birth, etc. This ideal
social contract theory embodies the ideal which Rawls calls justice as fairness — a conception based on the belief that each individual has certain fundamental inviolable rights as opposed to the belief that maximization of social utility is the only good. (Rawls supposes that individuals choosing from behind the veil of ignorance would choose principles guaranteeing fundamental rights for each rather than gambling on what their share might be in the allotment of natural assets or on what might be their lot if maximum social utility were the ideal.)

Given the notion of the veil of ignorance it might be expected that Rawls would simply stipulate that the individuals choosing from behind it, aside from not knowing their natural assets and their social position, would also not know to which generation they were going to belong. But Rawls rejects this possibility as stretching the notions of the original contract too far; for now all members of all generations would have to be seen as party to it. (Why this stretches the notion too far I find difficult to see.) Instead, Rawls adopts what he calls the "present time of entry interpretation" according to which those choosing the principles are understood to be all of the same generation though ignorant of what place in history their generation occupies. Rawls feels that this interpretation alone is inadequate to generate an obligation regarding future generations; for while the parties in the original position do not know when their generation will occur they may argue thus: either the generation(s) before them has saved or it has not; in either case nothing may be done about it now and hence, unless they care for succeeding generations, they may as well maximize their own satisfaction and agree not to save at all. Given this situation, Rawls sees only one way to generate a savings principle, namely, to alter what he calls the motivation assumption (he had initially assumed that the parties in the original position were mutually disinterested) so that the parties do care for at least immediately succeeding generations: "The parties are regarded as representing family lines, say, with ties of sentiment between successive generations."20 Provided they have these sentiments, Rawls argues that the parties in the original position will agree to a just
savings principle which will stipulate that they "must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilization, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but...must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of real capital accumulation."21

Rather than offer criticisms of Rawls myself, I should like to present the criticism of D. Clayton Hubin which is excellent, if not definitive, and then proceed to consider Hubin's modification of Rawls' argument. Hubin makes quite a number of points some of which are quite subtle and sophisticated and do not, for our purposes, warrant the time and space required to make them clear. I shall content myself with looking at his most serious and telling criticisms:

1) In Rawls' general account of justice, in order to even talk about justice obtaining between parties, it is necessary that the "circumstances of justice" hold. These circumstances are the conditions "which make human cooperation both possible and necessary"22 - individuals must be roughly equal in mental and physical power (so that none can dominate the rest) and vulnerable to attack (all subject to the united force of others), and there must be a moderate scarcity of goods. Hubin makes two points regarding the circumstances of justice and future generations: a) it is not clear that the circumstances of justice will hold for all time; b) while they may hold amongst members of one generation they do not hold amongst successive generations; for it is not the case that earlier generations are vulnerable to attack from later ones. This latter objection, Hubin feels, shows Rawls to be fundamentally mistaken in talking about justice between generations in the same fashion as he talks about justice between contemporaneous individuals.

2) As we have noted, Rawls excludes the possibility of all members of all generations being party to the ideal contract on the grounds that this would be stretching fantasy too far. However, he could get around this by stipulating that all the contractors are of the same generation but also that they do not know this.

3) Because he ignores the possibility in 2) and because he argues that if the contractors are all of the same generation then they will adopt no
principle of saving, Rawls thinks it necessary to alter the motivation assumption so that the contractors do care for succeeding generations; but not only would the adoption of the suggestion in 2) render this recourse unnecessary, Rawls' adherence to his own principles would also do so. For, he has stipulated, in developing his theory, that the principles chosen in the original position are chosen on the supposition that they will be strictly complied with. If this is so, however, then the contractors cannot argue that either previous generations have saved or they have not and conclude, on these grounds, that they should ignore future generations; for the principles they choose are to be understood as the principles which any generation would choose and comply with. Hence, if strict compliance is assumed it must also be assumed that any previous generation will have complied with the principles that the contractors decide upon.

4) Rawls says that his alteration of the motivation assumption is "natural enough" but once one alteration has been permitted why not more - why could the contractors not be motivated to care for other groups aside from families?

Of all these criticisms Hubin seems to take 1 b) as the most serious. He regards it as serious enough to discredit any attempt to build up an account based on the suggestion made in 2). Hubin thinks, however, that he can develop an account based on the contractarian approach which avoids the difficulties Rawls ends up in. He makes the following modifications to Rawls' account: 1) "the contractors know to which generation they belong - that is, they know the level of development of their society and the amount and condition of natural resources their society can draw on."
2) The contractors are mutually disinterested - "they neither have nor know whether they will forge bonds of affection to others".
3) Certain psychological principles are assumed to be true and are known to be true by the contractors, in particular the principle that people in our society "care about their offspring to such a degree that they to some extent identify their offsprings' interests with their own".23
Rubin claims that if these modifications are made the contractors will agree to some sort of principle to protect the interests of the next generation on the grounds that they would rather bank on the likelihood of their gaining by fitting the psychological principle than on gaining marginally by not making some sacrifice through saving. This principle is not chosen for all time, however, but is contingent upon the continuing truth of the psychological principle — an empirical matter.

Rubin's general stance now becomes clear: we have an obligation regarding future generations which is really an obligation to our contemporaries. It is an indirect obligation of the sort we mentioned earlier that a person might acquire regarding buildings or property. Other principles besides Rubin's principle of natural affection could yield the same result. Thus it might be maintained that the hope we see in future generations provides meaning for our lives or that as "lovers" of life and its beauties we want to see human life continued and improved.

I should like to make a number of objections to Rubin's account: 1) I disagree fundamentally with the ideal contract approach. Obviously no general criticism can be attempted here especially as it has been well done by others. I simply want to raise the question as to why we should feel obligated to do what some imaginary, abstract individuals would choose to do in an idealized situation. Ultimately, Rawls' theory turns out to be an incredibly complex and sophisticated normative theory with no convincing metaethical foundation. Without this foundation it seems arbitrary and nothing more than a parochial expression of the American liberal-democratic ideal.

2) What Rubin's account boils down to is a version of ethical egoism between generations. One generation, if it is rational, will act with regard to others in its own best interests. Generations succeeding us just happen to be lucky (a contingent psychological fact) that we care about them (or at least Rubin believes we do). But surely when we are asking about our moral relation to future generations we are asking more than about our collective feeling regarding them. If we were to be shown
evidence of some generation which did not care, did not subscribe to the same psychological principle that we do, and as a result caused untold harm to their successors, in full knowledge of what they were doing, could we possibly avoid condemning them as moral monsters? Yet according to the generational relativism Hubin ends up in, we cannot judge other generations because their feelings determine what is right for them. (Effectively, Hubin is treating future generations like buildings and property, i.e. as means to the satisfaction of our contemporaries. It is significant to note that he never provides an argument to indicate why future generations cannot have rights, why they cannot be ends in themselves. He seems to be too preoccupied with making things fit into Rawls' theory.)

3) Hubin believes that several generations into the future is all that our present psychological principle calls for concern over. Would we feel happy, though, performing some preventable action which we knew would cause harm in, say, twenty generations? And, would not our distress here be not because of natural affection - which imagination would find hard to stretch for twenty generations - but because we believed we were doing something wrong?

4. Summary

In this part of the paper we have dealt with a number of attempts to clarify our moral relation to future generations. They fell broadly into two categories: those that sought to show that future generations do have rights and that consequently we have obligations to them, and those that argued that we have obligations concerning future generations but that these obligations do not require us to assume that future generations have rights. In the first category several approaches were adopted: Feinberg argued that by analyzing the notion of right, as we commonly use it, we could see that it could legitimately be extended to the case of future generations. It turned out that this extension was not legitimate, though, because the criteria for the application of "right" were surreptitiously changed when future generations were considered. Golding saw our obligations as specified by our social ideal. Thus he saw us as obligated to future generations to the extent to which our social ideal is relevant to them. This account, however,
was vitiated by a vicious relativism: if two individuals' or groups' social ideals conflict, no method for determining which is correct is available. And there is a conflict of opinion now concerning how to treat future generations. Ultimately, Golding says no more than "Do what you think is right". Callahan, aside from falling into the same pitfalls as Golding, offered the argument that our obligations to our parents and predecessors engender obligations to our children and successors. But he does not really make it clear that we are in fact obligated to our parents or, if we are, that this obligation cannot be met directly without being passed on as an obligation to our children.

In the second category, too, different approaches were tried. Delattre tried to argue analogically that our present acceptance of responsibilities in cases where we do not know definitely that other persons are involved, commits us to responsibilities in the case of future generations. However, there is a difference in these two cases, and as Delattre does not indicate the ground for the ascription of responsibility in the former case, the analogy fails. Rawls' argument was based on an ideal contract approach. Rather than see all generations party to the contract (which would be, effectively, to give future generations rights) he sees the contracting parties as motivated by a concern for their successors. His account, which is full of inconsistencies and confusions, is brought to its "logical" conclusion by Hubin who argued that obligations regarding future generations are really obligations to our contemporaries. The parties to the contract, who are contemporaries, realize the psychological principle that persons in their generation generally care for their successors, realize they stand most likely to lose if they do not agree to a savings principle for future generations, and hence agree to one. This, however, is egoism on a generational scale and as such cannot provide an acceptable account of our moral relation to future generations.

As we noted earlier, all these arguments are permeated with talk about rights and obligations and with no metaethical talk about what it means to
say that something has a right. Such a metaethical investigation is, I think, indispensable. It frees one from the shackles of a restrictive vocabulary and a restrictive set of presuppositions. In the next and final part of the paper a concrete answer to the problem of our moral relation to future generations will be attempted, based on the metaethical theory - the reasons for action approach - developed in Part 1.
PART III

In this part of the paper the results we have achieved so far will be applied directly to the problem of our moral relation to future generations. First, in accordance with results reached in Part I, I shall see what sort of reasons for acting one way or another with regard to future generations can be discovered, by looking at some relevant legal examples and also by examining relevant general ethical principles (note: once we have raised the question, even choosing to ignore future generations is an action for which reasons can be demanded). The goal will be to show that we do have prima facie reasons for taking the welfare of future generations into account in our actions. Secondly, I shall consider the relation of our responsibility to future generations to our other responsibilities, the conditions limiting our prima facie reasons for acting on behalf of future generations. Golding's and Callahan's views on this matter will be examined. Finally, some concluding remarks and recommendations will be made.

1. Reasons for Action and Future Generations

At the conclusion of Part I, I said that in determining reasons for action in a particular case two steps should be taken: 1) The law should be consulted to see if it covers the case at hand or can be easily extended to it.

2) Since the law is never sufficient in providing reasons for action, the results of 1) should be compared with the general ethical concepts that are sanctioned by the collective mind. (As a matter of fact, there is no more dispute over fundamental prima facie reasons for acting, such as principles prohibiting killing, dishonesty, capricious exercise of authority, and so on, that there is over fundamental reasons in physics such as Newton's Laws or Maxwell's Equations). Let us take these two steps here.

Are there specific legal reasons for acting one way or another with regard to future generations? If not, are there legal reasons concerning other sorts of actions which are extendable to actions which affect future
generations? I am not aware of any direct legal pronouncements concerning future generations. However, I do think that some laws that have a current widespread acceptance are relevant to actions affecting future generations. The laws I have in mind might be broadly classified as property negligence and responsibility laws. Thus, if the chimney on my house, through improper care and attention, deteriorates to the point where it falls off and injures someone, or if I, through indolence, fail to shovel my walk in the winter and someone slips on it and injures themselves, or if I create a refuse heap on my property which causes health problems amongst my neighbours, then, in all these cases and multitudes of similar ones, I am considered responsible for any accidents which ensue. The legal precept behind these laws might be formulated thus: if a party A knows or ought to know that some action of his, or some failure to take action, regarding his property will likely or even possibly lead to someone else's injury and it in fact does so, then A is responsible. Further, in most cases, if it is detected, A may be held legally responsible even if his action or failure to act has not actually lead to an injury - I may be prosecuted for having a dangerous chimney, for not shovelling my walk, or for letting refuse collect even if no injury has yet resulted.

Surely the connection between these cases and the case of future generations is evident. We are now in the position of being able to do things to our environment which we know will likely or possibly have deleterious effects on future generations; our position appears to be entirely analogous to that of the property owner who knows that his chimney will likely or possibly fall on someone or damage another's property. It might be objected, however, that there are two differences: 1) The examples given above all involve property ownership and the general presumption that an owner is responsible for his property. This generation, however, does not "own" the environment. 2) In the examples the agents and the parties injured are contemporaries while in the case of future generations this is not so. These differences, it might be claimed, destroy the analogy.
To this we respond as follows: 1) While the examples do deal with property ownership and so does the underlying precept, the latter need not - it could be reformulated to state that knowledge of likely or possible harm arising through action or failure to act is sufficient for responsibility. Examples can be given where this modified precept holds: if I thoughtlessly break glass all over a public beach or mindlessly shoot off a gun in a public place I am liable to be prosecuted.

2) To this objection we may reply that the precept does not specify that the parties be contemporaries. If it be answered that perhaps it should, we can argue that modified examples can be given which show that contemporaneity is not always taken to be a necessary condition for responsibility. Imagine the following case: A, who has a dangerously deteriorated chimney and is in full knowledge of this fact, dies suddenly and B, who is a baby born immediately after A's death and who is being pushed in a stroller past A's house, is killed when A's chimney collapses on him. We would all maintain that A was responsible for B's death and that he should have taken steps to avoid such an accident. While A's liability to be prosecuted terminates with his death, his responsibility does not and this fact finds it's legal expression in A's estate being liable. Surely it would be specious to go on to maintain that A was responsible only because there were people who were alive when he was who were also potential victims of his negligence.

The general legal precept behind all these examples seems to be that knowledge of injury or harm which will likely or possibly follow upon one's action or failure to act is a prima facie reason for refraining from acting or for acting, as the case may be. Knowledge of the identity of the party likely to receive the injury or even of his existence is irrelevant for there to be responsibility, i.e. reasons for acting, to avoid injury. Given that there is this unambiguous legal precept, embedded in a multitude of laws, we must now ask whether it is consistent with the general ethical principles that we adopt. It seems evident that this is so. Indeed, I would say that this is one case where the law and ethical principles coincide. To knowingly commit preventable harm, regardless of whether the
identity of the person is known or even whether he exists, is surely, in the absence of forceful extenuating considerations, the quintessence of immorality. This principle is one that finds its expression in all cultures and times (though what constitutes harm may vary from one place and time to another). As such a universal principle it is a *prima facie* reason for action; that is, in any debate over the performing of a preventable action which we know either will or will possibly lead to harm, there is an initial consideration against performing it. Thus, because of the irrelevance of the present existence of the party likely to be harmed, we must, in performing any action, consider its consequences not merely for those now alive but for those yet to come.

The principle that knowingly committing preventable harm is wrong regardless of the present existence of the person harmed is one example of a general ethical principle, echoed in our laws, which commits us to taking the interests of future generations into account when deciding how to act. Are there any other such principles? There are perhaps a number of others, but I should like to consider briefly just one other such principle, held in general and exemplified in certain laws, namely, the principle that he who benefits pays.

The principle that he who benefits pays can be seen at work in a number of laws. For instance, if the residents of a particular city block want a sidewalk they pay for it through a local improvement tax; the people in the next block or on the opposite side of the city are not forced to pay for something from which they derive no benefit. Similarly, graduated income tax can be seen as embodying the notion that those who benefit the most from a certain social arrangement should pay the most towards perpetuating it. (Many other specialized taxes provide examples of this principle.) However, as well as being exemplified in numerous laws, there is no question that the principle that he who benefits pays is accepted as a general ethical principle, as a *prima facie* reason for action. It lies at the heart of our notions of equity and fairness.
Again, this principle has a clear application to future generations. We are now in a position to sweep many things under the carpet, to satisfy our own wants at the expense of future generations. We may, to use the jargon of economics, export costs into the future. The principle that he who benefits pays rules directly against such behaviour. For this principle, like the principle that knowingly committing preventable harm is wrong, is to be understood as regulating relations between persons; and, provided that the one individual's actions do or can affect the other in a way the former can know, their temporal relation is irrelevant. Thus, so long as we know we are, or are likely, to benefit while someone else pays we are obliged to try and remedy the situation, regardless of whether the party likely to be paying is now alive or not. (The following interesting point can be made in connection with the preceding remarks: it is always the case that the effects of any action of mine occur after my acting. Thus, anyone wanting to argue that the two principles we have cited above do not apply in the case of future generations simply on the grounds that the consequences of our actions occur many generations hence seems to be on a slippery slope: since the consequences of all actions occur after the actions - sometimes a few seconds after, sometimes a few days or years after - how can any specific time interval such as the life span of the agent (which may not be known at the time of the action and which will vary between agents) be held as a limiting factor on his responsibility? Some other criterion for limiting responsibility must be appealed to. (I shall suggest one in section 3).)

Having discovered two principles which entail a responsibility to future generations and which, we can safety assume, are accepted by the collective mind, our problem now becomes how to place this responsibility to future generations, these prima facie reasons for action, amongst the constellation of our other responsibilities. What is the relation of our responsibility to future generations to our other responsibilities. We shall attempt to answer this question in section 3, but, first, since the reasons given in this section (moral reasons) are not the only sort of reasons for acting, let us see what sort of prudential reasons there are for acting in cases where future generations' interests are at stake.
2. Prudential Reasons for Action and Future Generations

As was noted in Part I, section 4, there are legitimate self-interested or prudential reasons for action as well as moral or non-prudential reasons for action. While there are clearly many self-interested reasons for not acting with the benefit of future generations in mind, are there any self-interested reasons for acting on their behalf?

I think that there are and I shall mention four such reasons here:

1) Acting with the interests of future generations in mind, acting so as not to slough off our problems on them or to create difficulties or hazards for them, serves to reinforce the sort of moral attitudes we like to see in our society right now. That is, we prefer to live in a society where people do not slough off their problems on others (possibly ourselves), or create difficulties or hazards for them. Depending on how we treat future generations we may either encourage or discourage an attitude of consideration for others.

2) Closely related to 1) is the argument that most of us have a desire to be decent persons in our own eyes, to maintain our self-respect. Deliberately acting callously with regard to future generations would almost certainly jeopardize this self-respect.

3) For many people, the future of mankind provides a meaning for their own lives either because they have some utopian vision or because they see future generations as a trace of themselves (their impact on the world). Taking part in a whole — the history of mankind — lends a meaning or purpose to living that existing as a solitary, historically isolated individual may lack. Anyone motivated by this sort of feeling will not want to seriously threaten the interests of future generations.
4) Few of us want to go down in history as a generation which was thoughtless and self-centered, running roughshod over the concerns of later defenceless generations. What is at stake is our historical reputation and most of us, I think, would like to be known not as villains who ignored future generations' interests but as a concerned generation which at least did its best to take into account the interests of future generations.

It is not necessary that the arguments here be accepted in order for it to be established that there are reasons for acting on behalf of future generations. The arguments in the previous section have already shown, irrefutably I believe, that there are moral reasons for acting on account of future generations. The arguments in this section are only pointed out as additional reasons for acting with consideration for future generations' interests and to dispel the illusion that acting for future generations will, by definition, be acting against our own self-interest.

3. Us and Them: The Question of Priorities

It is one thing to establish a prima facie responsibility, it is another to be able to specify those conditions in which it is binding and those in which it may be overridden. In fact it is probably impossible to do so absolutely. What I hope to do in this section is to indicate, partially through rejecting the limits that Golding and Callahan try to put on our obligations to future generations, the sort of considerations that I think do validly come into play when deciding on the limits and the priority of our obligations to future generations.

Golding's views on this matter are closely tied up with his notion of social ideal and although we have already thrown serious doubt onto his use of this notion it is worth considering how he applies it when trying to limit our obligations to future generations, for the position he adopts might be found by many to be tempting. As will be recalled, Golding argued that our obligations extend to future generations only insofar as
they are members of our moral community, i.e. to the extent that our social ideal is relevant to them. He now goes on to say of future generations: "that they are members of our moral community is highly doubtful, for we probably do not know what to desire for them" and "one might go so far as to say that if we have an obligation to distant future generations it is an obligation not to plan for them. Not only do we not know their conditions of life, we also do not know whether they will maintain the same (or a similar) conception of the good life for man as we do."¹ Golding concludes that "the more distant the generation we focus upon, the less likely it is that we have an obligation to promote its good."² - we should concern ourselves with the welfare of those generations immediately following our own and not worry about the very distant, to whom our conception of the good life may well be irrelevant.

This position brings out clearly Golding's generational relativism. He feels it quite likely that future generations will have different social ideals from ours and hence, presumably because this obligation is part of our social ideal, that we have an obligation not to plan for them. But beyond a point this argument becomes absurd: would, hypothetically, Golding agree to performing certain actions which would be to our benefit but which would have the consequence of leading in, say, twenty generations to the devastation of the planet, the reduction of rivers and oceans to festering cesspools and of verdant farmland to barren desert, on the grounds that it is quite possible that by that time people will marvel at cesspools and deserts? Albeit this is a hypothetical case, but as one which Golding's position could entail it illustrates well the deficiency of his approach. We cannot justifiably assume that any reasons for action may change and act on that basis without specifying which reasons we are assuming will change and without giving reasons why our current reasons for action might be rejected or modified. This is so for the following two reasons: 1) Fundamentally, what the collective mind posits as reasons for action changes very little, if at all, with time and even when it does it does so only within the framework of existing reasons. Thus the logic of reasons for action is
such that they cannot change radically and fundamentally. Further, there is good inductive evidence that certain fundamental reasons for action have remained central and little-changed. (Of course, many reasons for action do change and the changes may occur in numerous ways — value change is an amazingly intricate process. In referring to fundamental reasons for action here I have had in mind primarily reasons for acting regarding physical or biological survival and well-being. Reasons for acting regarding social roles, say, or relations of production seem much more to be subject to change. There is room for further discussion here. Reasons for acting regarding physical or biological survival and well-being may, to be sure, change as well. For instance, "going out for a breath of air" may, in one hundred years, have lost its power as a reason for action and yet we can be sure that solicitude regarding one's physical well-being will not have. The point is that while secondary reasons will change, primary ones will not; and this is because the secondary reasons are really combinations of primary reasons and factual premises. It is the latter which can become dated.)

2) It is a reason for action now, part of what we call responsible behaviour, that we do not make unfounded assumptions or disregard relevancies when human life may be at stake. Thus, we would be irresponsible if we performed, or failed to perform, actions which could lead to, or prevent, what we, certainly, would consider to be serious consequences solely on the grounds of possible future alteration of our "social ideal" (grounds which we have argued in 1 are very weak).

Callahan criticizes Golding on precisely this point:

...since we cannot know what their social ideal will be, we should act on the assumption that it will not be all that dissimilar from our own; we have no special reason to think otherwise. Hence, the responsible course of behaviour in this generation would be to take what we do know, and can reasonably project and act accordingly.\(^3\)
(He also makes the point, which Golding seems to overlook, that the social ideal and the conditions of life of future generations will be in part determined by what we do now, and in particular by what attitude we adopt towards future generations.) I am in agreement with the substance of Callahan's argument, but think that he can and probably needs to adduce stronger grounds for his rejection of Golding's position. Callahan simply assumes that we should act on the assumption that the social ideal of future generations will not be different from our own, that it needs to be proved otherwise before we act otherwise. As he offers no grounds for this assumption, an opponent might just as simply choose to reject it. He needs, therefore, to provide grounds for his assumption and this ought to be done, I feel, as I have done in the course of my criticism of Golding above.

Aside from criticizing Golding, Callahan offers some considerations of his own concerning the "priority problem". I quote him at length:

One thing that can be said for the present generation over against future generations, is that they have existing rights...They are here and future generations are not. The claim of future generations against us is a conditional claim, in the sense that it depends on their existing to make the claim. That we know they will exist is enough to determine that their claim is not a fictitious one; but it is conditional in the sense that a number of conditions have to be fulfilled before the claim can be entered, the most important of which is that they exist in actuality and not just potentially. Over against that situation are presently living human beings, whose claims are actualized claims, whose rights are in no sense conditional. In this respect, it is difficult to see how one could set aside these claims in the name of claims as yet not made - even though we have a moral certainty they will be made. I am only saying that, so far as claims of rights are concerned, those who are living take priority over those who do not as yet exist. Put more strongly, I do not see how one could deny the claim to a very basic human right made by a person now living in favour of the conditional claim which can be made by someone who will exist in the future. 4
Though this passage is very confused its drift is clear: future generations' claims are "conditional" and hence they take second place to actual claims made by existing individuals.

Callahan does not make the distinction between having and making claims and consequently there is an ambiguity in his speaking of future generations' claims as conditional. Does he mean that the existence of future generations' claims is conditional on their existing or does he only mean that their making claims is conditional on their existence? If he means the former then it is hard to see how he believes that future generations' claims have any power over us and if he means the latter then what he says is trivially true but does not serve to resolve the question of the priority of future generations' claims. Callahan goes on to argue that the priority of this generation's rights only extends to those rights which are "fundamental to their own human existence" by which he means rights not just necessary for biological survival but also for a life of human dignity. Three points may be made here: 1) It is not clear, and Callahan does not provide any examples, that there are any rights beyond those necessary for a life of human dignity. These putative further rights are supposed to be those to which future generations' basic rights would taken precedence. But if there are in fact none then Callahan has done future generations no favour in granting them this precedence.

2) It may be the case now, and indeed it may always be the case, that the resources required to give everyone alive a life of "human dignity", as Callahan defines it, are simply not available. If this is so, then Callahan seems committed to the position that we never ought to do anything for the sake of future generations.

3) The assertion that the priority of this generation's rights extends only to those rights which are fundamental to their own existence cannot be founded on what has gone before: once he has "conditionalized" the claims of future generations, made them secondary to our own, it is difficult to see how Callahan can justify putting some of future generations' claims ahead of any of our own.
Thus, against Golding I maintain that our obligations to future
generations are not limited by the possibility that our social ideal
will not apply to them; and against Callahan, I hold that future generations' claims are not conditional and hence secondary to our own. It might be feared that this position over-commits us to the future but this is not so. While our commitments are not limited by the possibility of future generations having different social ideals or by the "conditional" nature of future generations' claims, they are limited by our lack of knowledge. For the most part we have no idea how our actions are going to affect people in even the next generation, let alone ten or twenty generations in the future. And lack of knowledge does dissolve our obligations to them; for one cannot be obliged to bring about or prevent an occurrence when one does not know the effect of one's own actions in bringing about or preventing the occurrence in question. In the rare, indeed almost non-existent cases, where we do know accurately what effect our actions will have, we are committed to act as though the persons concerned were actually living persons. Thus the cases of full knowledge and the cases of complete ignorance are unproblematic. What is problematic are the cases in between, those in which we foresee only probable or even possible effects of our actions. It is to these cases, finally, that we must address ourselves.

4. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Thus far, in this part of the paper, we have established two principal results: 1) We do have a prima facie obligation to future generations.

2) This obligation is not limited by the possible irrelevance of our form of solicitude to their social ideal nor is this obligation in any way conditional and hence secondary to obligations to existing persons. It is, however, limited by the lack of factual knowledge we have of the effects of our actions on future generations and of the material conditions of their lives.
It is clear then that working out our obligations to future
generations is an exercise in juggling probabilities. If we wished to
think in idealized terms we could think of a mammoth social equation,
the "obligation equation", which we would consult in making every public
policy decision. It would be a function of all the possible effects of
our proposed action and the probabilities of each outcome along with an
ordered priority list of our fundamental obligations. Of course, the
mind boggles at the very conception of such an equation. And yet all
forms of human government can be seen as particular attempts at a
formulation of such an equation, with progressive sophistication through­
out history of our knowledge of the effects of our actions. Unfortunately,
but apparently unavoidably, this progression has been accompanied by an
increase in the sphere of effects of our actions and an increase in the
factors counting as prima facie reasons for action, which increases have
in turn required yet more knowledge and yet more re-evaluation and analysis
of reasons for action.

To turn away from this somewhat gloomy description of the magnitude
and unending nature of our task, I should like to conclude this part of
the paper by mentioning three considerations which I hope can provide
some guidance through the tangled paths of obligation.

First, I should like to sketch roughly a decision procedure for
problems in which the interests of future generations are possibly at
stake. The following questions should be answered in this order:
1) What are the possible undesirable consequences the proposed
action (or omission of action) could have on future generations?
(Obviously limitations of time and knowledge will not permit us to
investigate all possible undesirable consequences. What we must do
is identify, on the basis of the knowledge we do have, the most likely
undesirable consequences. Our definition of "likely" should be as broad
as the time and cost figures limiting our study permit.)
2) How could this (these) consequence(s) come about? That is, what are
the necessary causal conditions for each of the undesirable situations
(our action or omission of action will be one of these)?
3) What are the probabilities of each of the necessary conditions occurring?
4) Which of the necessary conditions are within our control?
5) What is the cost of "defusing" each of the necessary conditions within our control?

Now, if the cost involved in eliminating the cheapest necessary condition within our control is more than the cost of the worst possible consequence of our action (or omission of action) for future generations, then clearly we are in the right in going ahead and acting (or omitting action). If this is not the case, then it becomes a matter of balancing off the cost differential against the probabilities of the necessary conditions outside our control. Thus, if there is a high probability of the necessary conditions outside our control occurring and the cost differential is large, i.e. if the cost to them is going to be large compared to the cost to us, then we should act in their favour, whereas if the reverse is true, a low probability of necessary conditions outside our control holding and a small cost differential, then we should act in our favour. (It is a feature of this procedure that future costs are not discounted against present ones. Future costs are to be taken as completely on a par with present costs: the only discounting factor we allow is lack of knowledge – as our reasoning becomes more and more probabilistic our responsibility diminishes, though not in a linear fashion (the relation between magnitude of consequence and probability of occurrence, on the one hand, and responsibility on the other, deserves much further study.))

Each of steps 1 through 5 involves factual knowledge and steps 1 and 5 involve value judgements. This brings me to my second point, which is that we have an obligation to gain knowledge. That is, as actors we have an obligation to determine to the best of our abilities all the relevant factual information for steps 1 to 5 and, through continual analysis of our reasons for action, to determine what we consider costs and what the priorities of these costs are. Of course this obligation to knowledge is itself limited by factors of cost and time: we are forced to act without full knowledge and this increases the probabilistic nature of our reasoning.
Finally, given our overwhelming lack of information regarding the long-term effects of our actions, it would seem that the responsible course of action would be simply to avoid performing, as much as possible, those acts the consequences of which we are not certain. The dawning awareness of the effects of our actions on the environment and ourselves and our vast ignorance of the details and long range nature of these effects suggests that the best policy may be to think small, to reduce our demands and consequently to narrow the sphere of our influence, while we accumulate knowledge. For, part of being a responsible agent is to avoid acting when one does not know what the consequences of one's actions will be. Of course, as we have noted, it is frequently necessary to act without full knowledge. What demands careful examination, though, is what we conceive to be necessary. Thus, what I am saying here is really a plea for a thoughtful and serious reflection on what are to count as costs in 5 above. Our present consumption of natural resources and energy can only be described as profligate. Much of what is produced is non-essential and every product seems to create its own environmental problems. Consequently, when we contemplate the introduction of vast new quantities of energy into our society we must be aware not only of the dangers and the cost involved in the production of the energy but also of the cost which the inappropriate use of the energy may incur. The obligation we have to future generations, which I have laboured hard to show ought to be a real factor in our decision-making, is one more consideration which lends weight to the suggestion that we ought, in the face of ignorance, to limit the sphere of our influence. What must be done will perforce be done; but we must develop a keener eye for the necessary.
NOTES

Part I


2. This is a loose formulation of the categorical imperative. See I. Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, (Indianapolis, 1959), p. 55.


10. Kerner, op. cit., p. 43. The following objection to Stevenson's psychological theory of meaning is one Kerner presents on pp. 51-52.


12. This section is based on Hudson, op. cit., pp. 249-329, and Warnock, op. cit., pp. 48-72.


17. This is Toulmin's example. Toulmin, op. cit., p. 86 and ff.
18. See above p. 20 and the discussion of descriptivism below pp. 24-25.


Part II

1. "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family in the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world and is in accord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as proclaimed by the U.N.; And whereas it is public policy in Ontario that every person is free and equal in dignity and rights without regard to race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin;..."


5. Feinberg, op. cit., p. 44.

6. Ibid., p. 64.

7. Ibid., p. 65.


9. Ibid., p. 90.

10. Ibid., p. 93.

11. Ibid., p. 91.

12. Ibid., p. 92.

13. Ibid., p. 95.


22. Ibid., p. 126.

Part III
2. Ibid., p. 98.
3. Callahan, op. cit., p. 274.
4. Ibid., pp. 277-278.
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