
RESPONSIBILITY TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

A Schumacher Institute Challenge Paper

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The Challenge: As cultural and social beings we are inescapably future oriented. How we live and produce futures, however, is biographically, culturally and socially distinct. It changes historically, over our lifetime and with specific contexts. As knowledge practices, approaches to the future have consequences. Today the consequences of technological action in particular present us with a new context for accountability and responsibility. It is the challenge to moral conduct, presented by the contemporary context, I want to consider here. The key questions that guide my thoughts for this challenge paper are as follows:

1. What is responsibility to the future?
2. Is it possible to be responsible for futures we create?
3. Are we and should we be responsible to future generations?

1. What is responsibility to the future?

We have to think about it analogous to responsibility for our actions in the present. To be responsible for our actions is part of what it is to be a citizen. It is the mark of a human being that has achieved a certain level of maturity and is part of a community. Only small children and severely handicapped persons are not held responsible for their actions.

As citizens we are also held responsible for persons in our care and for our possessions. That is to say, responsibility covers not just our actions but also our social positions as guardians, carers, and owners. Thus, for example, it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children attend school. Also, if I own a tree that causes damage because it has not been maintained properly I am responsible for that damage. If I sell the property or die before the tree, then the responsibility for the tree passes to the next owner.

From these brief examples we can extract some common principles. They include that responsibility is a) bounded in time and space, b) tied to individuals (their actions and possessions), c) does not extend beyond the lifetime of individuals. They include further that causal links can be established to the effects of specific actions/possessions.

What would it therefore mean to open up that notion of responsibility to the future? It would no longer be bounded in time. It would have to exceed the life time of individuals, thus cannot be tied to the one individual and, depending on the length and complexity of the processes involved, effects could not (necessarily) be causally linked to specific actions.

Responsibility to the future therefore means a break with the key criteria that currently underpin our understanding of responsibility. This, however, is more challenging than it appears at first sight because our taken-for-granted principles of responsibility are rooted in morals established in Greek antiquity. Our current common-sense understanding of responsibility thus has a very long history. To break with that tradition, therefore, requires change at a very deep structural level of current social, political and legal arrangements.

This brings me to my second question.

2. Is it possible to be responsible for futures we create?

The first thing to note is that we constantly extend ourselves into the future, that everything we do has a future component: our daily actions, our plans and projects, and our commitments and duties.

The second thing to note is that we assume ownership over the future: First, we regard the future as ours to design, shape and mould. We activate this assumption daily when we plan and make decisions, when we use technology such as refrigerators, cars and internet banking, carry the shopping in plastic bags and fly to our holiday destination. Secondly, we consider the future as a legitimate territory for us to conquer: with inventions and promises, with wars and political interventions, and with economic measures such as insurance to counteract potential disasters. Thirdly, we utilise the future as a domain of economic opportunity to be exploited: with mortgages and loans, investments and bonds or shopping with credit cards.

Now let us briefly focus on some examples of actions together with their effects that do not fit the conventional responsibility model, that is, responsibility bounded in time and space, tied to individuals and individual life times, and causally connected to actions and/or ownership. Pertinent examples would be the invention, production and use of plastics, heat engines, and nuclear power. All three are socially distributed technologies that permeate the socio-environmental base of contemporary existence. This means, such technologies are produced and used not just by one individual but socially by a multitude of people. Involvements with these technologies tend to be interdependent and networked across space and time. And the effects tend to reach beyond the individuals involved to a much broader base of recipients that includes animals, plants and even the inorganic world.

In their effects, these technologies transcend individuals' life times. They are not tied to individual ownership. They are unbounded in time and space, and they cannot be causally connected to individual actions and/or possessions. Importantly, those affected may not even be born yet and these (unborn) future recipients cannot hold us to account because they are without voice or vote. This means that a) the principles, which currently underpin our understanding of responsibility, do not work in such contexts, b) our assumptions are not appropriate to the contemporary condition for action and c) we can act with impunity because there is no one to hold us to account. It is, in other words, a set-up for irresponsibility. And that, surely, is an unacceptable state of affairs.

This brings me to my final question.

3. Are we and should we be responsible to future generations?

My answer is yes on both counts and my argument is as follows:

1. The fact that there is a grave mismatch between our taken-for-granted assumptions about responsibility and the contemporary context, where the outcomes of actions are dispersed across time and space, is no valid reason not to extend our understanding of responsibility to encompass affected future generations.
2. The fact that we have not developed conceptual tools and legal/institutional arrangements to cover the contemporary context of action does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.
3. The fact that those affected cannot hold us to account does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.

4. The fact that effects are dispersed across time and space in an interdependent way, which makes causal analysis difficult, if not impossible, does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.
5. The fact that we do not have appropriate social, legal and institutional structures in place, to hold us accountable, does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.

It is my argument that responsibility to the future and future generations applies irrespective of a) how far into the future the effects of actions may extend, b) how complex the effects are intermeshed, and c) how many others are implicated. And, if we do not have the appropriate social, legal and institutional structures in place to hold us accountable, then it is high time that these were developed.

The principle the development of new structures should be based on is that the temporal reach of responsibility should match the temporal reach of our actions. Not just our 'footprint' but also our 'timeprint' should be encompassed in the contemporary principle of expanded responsibility. In other words, if the reach of our actions extends over thousands of years and thereby produces living conditions for many generations of descendants, then our sphere of responsibility ought to extend accordingly so that it matches the reach of our actions.

The challenges associated with this shift in perspective on responsibility affect all aspects of contemporary life: economic, educational, environmental, legal, political, private and public, scientific, social, and technological. The challenges thus presented, therefore, need to be worked through for the entirety of contemporary existence: individual and social, private and public, national and international.

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