

Apel and Locke on our Duty to Future Generations

Hiroshi Abe

Kyoto University*

abe.hiroshi.7w@kyoto-u.ac.jp

ABSTRACT. Why do we, today's people, owe a duty to future generations with whom we will not overlap? In my paper, I aim at answering this question step by step. The first step is to respond to the question ("Why-Question 1" or "WQ1") why human beings should continue to exist. I try this by critically considering Karl-Otto Apel's argument for the survival of human beings from the viewpoint of his own discourse ethics. This consideration, however, leads us to the second step where we are faced with the following question ("WQ2"): For what reason do *we* — this particular generation and no other — owe a duty to future people? In order to answer this, I will interpret John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* and *Book of Rites*, a Chinese classic of Confucianism. From this interpretation, I would like to conclude that we are responsible *for* future people as far as we are responsible *to* past generations who delegated such future-oriented responsibility to us.

KEYWORDS. Environmental Philosophy; Intergenerational Responsibility; Discourse Ethics; Karl-Otto Apel; John Locke.

* Correspondence: Hiroshi Abe – Yoshida-nihonmatsu-cho, Sakyo-ku, 606-8501 Kyoto, Japan.



1. Introduction

Why do we, today's people, owe a duty to future generations with whom we will not overlap? Before entering into this central question of my paper, I would like to begin by clarifying its background. Banal as it is to say, it is undeniable that human activities are making a profound and irretrievable impact on the Earth, a good example of which would be global warming. Furthermore, these anthropogenic effects are widespread temporally as well as spatially. Hence, Günther Anders claims:

If we shall not be behind the effects of our [technological] products in terms of morality, [...] we have to note that *the horizon which concerns us*, i.e. our horizon of responsibility, *reaches as far as the horizon where we can influence others or be influenced by them*; that it becomes global. [...] What must be extended is the *temporal* as well as spatial horizon of our responsibility for our neighbor. Since our present activities [...] influence the coming generations together with other factors, they belong to our times' sphere of influence. *All of those who are to come have always already "reached"* or reached *us, because they are dependent on us.*¹

Now that we are, presumably, the first in history to be faced with «the possibility of self-extinction»² which could be realized, if only the worldwide cumulative effects of our trivial individual actions in everyday life such as car driving, overconsumption of wood and paper, etc. lead us to a peaceful and slow death, it is up to us whether human beings continue to exist. In my view, this imbalance of power between coming generations and us seems to imply that we owe it to them to facilitate the condition which would allow them to survive us in the future. I believe that a consensus supporting this view has

1 ANDERS 2011, 68-9 (my translation; emphasis in original).

2 ANDERS 2011, 67 (my translation).

already been made among environmental scientists and specialists who are engaged in researching how to protect future generations.

Nevertheless, it is quite right for us to ask *for what reason* we owe such a duty to future people: Regardless of the above-mentioned context of the question, it is possible for us to say after the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* that «I say that the world may go to pot for me so long as I always get my tea». Or we can even insist with David Hume: «'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to scratching of my finger».³ Obviously, if we did not necessarily have a duty to future people, then all of the how-to research on the protection of them would not make sense. We should, therefore, show (against Dostoevsky and Hume) that there is good reason for justifying our responsibility towards mankind's existence. This is why I would like to first address the following question: Why should human beings continue to exist? (Hereafter, 'Why-Question 1' or 'WQ1')

2. Considerations on the WQ1

Needless to say, I cannot answer this question by appealing to our philanthropy or sentimentalism, because the problem is, as Hume says, denying mankind's existence is not necessarily «contrary to reason». Hence, I would like to apply one of the most popular theories of rationality, i.e. discourse ethics (in particular, Karl-Otto Apel's version) to the WQ1. Accordingly, let us presuppose that, in what follows, the concept of rationality is defined as communicative rationality in the meaning of Apel, which states that we make validity claims for the sake of well-grounded arguments in obedience to fundamental communicative rules accepted officially in a certain communication community.

Since he puts emphasis on the «dimension of intersubjectivity and

3 HUME 1992 [1739], 416.

speech communication»⁴ in his notion of rationality and supports a consensus theory of truth, he regards the validity of an argument to be intersubjective validity. In his discourse ethics, therefore, an argument does not deserve its validity claims until it is, after critical examination, consentaneously admitted by all members of a communication community. However, what authorizes them in approving the argument? It is, according to him, idealized communication conditions (such as absolute sincerity of whoever argues, equal rights of all participants in discussion, etc.), which no real communication community is in a position to fulfill, for whose progressive realization nevertheless every real community should aim as its constant task. This implies that those who argue in the real communication community to which they belong must, as it were, already presuppose an ideal community that would perfectly satisfy all of the idealized communication conditions and hence be able to finally justify their claims for intersubjective validity. In other words, while we make a validity claim for the sake of our argument in a real communication community, we expect it to be approved, in fact, by not only this particular real community but also – or rather exactly – an ideal community by which the very approval of the real community can be definitively authorized.

Consequently, our own real communication community must proceed to be extended for the purpose of approximating to the ideal unconditioned community, which, in principle, all possible – i.e. *de jure* as well as *de facto* – rational beings would constitute. If that is the case, the extent of this particular real community in the true sense covers all today's people as long as they are rational.

(a) Suppose someone claims in a real communication community that human beings should not exist. Undoubtedly, in order that the very claim is accepted as intersubjectively valid in her community, which should correspond to all people at present, she cannot dispense with their existence. She need, rather, secure «the survival of the

4 APEL 2004, 242-3 (my translation; partial emphasis in original).

human species as the real communication community»,⁵ otherwise she would run into a *performative contradiction* between the *negative* claim and her own *affirmative* speech act.

(b) Nevertheless, one might refute (a): If we decide that the notion of 'the existence of human beings' should denote not so much contemporaries' actual being as the future continuous existence of coming generations, then we can avoid the above-mentioned contradiction. In other words, it is not irrational that following the proper procedure of discourse, all people at present in the real communication community agree in not allowing future generations after themselves to exist. Indeed this objection seems to be plausible, but I think otherwise: Just because such a proposal «has been factually accepted by all the persons concerned at present»⁶, it does not follow, as Apel rightly claims, that it fulfills enough conditions for reaching consensus «to be acceptable to all persons concerned».⁷ That is to say, even if all the persons of the present time unanimously agree on the above proposal to deny the existence of all people succeeding themselves, they are obliged, in spite of – or rather, exactly because of – the very agreement, to enable their descendants to survive in the future, since the actual generation ought to have this agreement exposed to coming generations' further examination and revision as long as it is a fallible agreement because of its facticity and hence should continue approximating to the definitive consensus in the above-mentioned ideal communication community.

3. A Critique of the Apelian Argument and the Transformation of the WQ1 into the WQ2

For the above reasons, it seems to me that we can deny future people's existence neither in the case of (a) nor (b) without running into a

5 APEL 1973, 431 (my translation; partial emphasis in original).

6 APEL 2004, 240 (my translation; partial emphasis in original).

7 APEL 2004, 240 (my translation).

performative contradiction. In other words, we cannot help but affirm mankind's survival if we are to take ourselves as rational.⁸

Indeed, therefore, coming generations do not yet exist but should be in the future. On the other hand, I think that there is a remarkable analogy between the Apelian argument for the survival of human beings and classic ontological proofs for God's existence (for example, Anselm of Canterbury's version), because, like the former, the latter does not permit us to deny God's existence either, which is, according to Anselm, already implied in the definition of God — unless we contradict ourselves logically⁹. If that is the case, then, in my view, it follows that the above argument for human beings' 'Ought to survive' is not yet sufficient to enable them to exist *actually* in the future, as Immanuel Kant criticized the ontological proof for God's existence by claiming that even if «we attempt to think existence through the pure category alone, *we cannot specify a single mark distinguishing it from mere possibility*»¹⁰. What does this mean precisely?

-
- 8 However, unless I am mistaken, Apel himself has a different opinion from mine. What follows from (b) is, according to him, not such a performative contradiction as I previously mentioned but, at most, a «violation of the moral obligation» toward «the possibility of an ideal consensus» (cf. APEL 2004, 240, my translation). Or he merely claims: «Indeed, in my view, it is also already implicated in the dependence of serious argumentation on the coherence and ability to achieve consensus of all valid problem-solutions that the present existent communication community of human beings should find its uninterrupted continuation in the future under the condition of equality of entitlement [to the definitive consensus]» (APEL 1988, 203, my translation).
- 9 According to Anselm, we can show (not by faith but by reason) that God exists: «Now we believe that You [= the God] are something than which nothing greater can be thought [*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*)]. [...] Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. [...] Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality» (ANSELM 1979 [1077], 117).
- 10 KANT 1992 [1787], 506 (my emphasis). In relation to this claim, Kant explains his idea further: «When, therefore, I think a being as the supreme reality, without any defect, the question still remains whether it exists or not. For though, in my concept, nothing may be lacking of the possible real content of a thing in general, something is still lacking in its relation to my whole state of thought, namely [in so far as I am unable to assert] that

It is true that the Apelian argument shows that coming generations should exist sometime in the future and hence those who precede them must care for them in advance. It does not necessarily follow from this, nevertheless, that it is we today's people that have to be responsible for the existence of human beings, since we might be allowed to ask, like Cain did to the Lord: Are we (or rather, *only* we) our future generations' keeper?¹¹ How should one answer this question? Suppose that we considered nothing for the future people (say, after 1,000 years), simply because we do not necessarily owe it to them to do so as our own duty. Then our negligence could possibly destroy other generations (say, 300 years after us) whom we would expect to care for the survival of the human race, to say nothing of the very people after 1,000 years that are to be protected. In my view, this implies that our previous question should be replied affirmatively: Yes, we, the present generation, are our future generations' keeper – unless we are to be condemned for human extinction caused by our own global destruction and «cursed from the earth»¹².

Hence, in order to lay firm groundwork for mankind's survival, I ought to further transform the WQ1 into the WQ2: Why do *we* – this particular generation and no other – owe a duty to future generations?

3. Considerations on the WQ2

In my view, a brief and tentative answer to this question would be as follows: Because, broadly speaking, only those who actually exist in each age have two kinds of responsibilities interweaving with each other through all ages of human history. What are these responsibilities? I would like to reply by quoting from *Book of Rites*,

knowledge of this object is also possible *a posteriori*. And here we find the source of our present difficulty» (KANT 1992 [1787], 505-6, translator's additional explanation in brackets).

11 *Genesis* (KJV) 4, 9: «And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?»

12 *Genesis*, 4, 11.

one of the classics of Confucianism:

Caring for a descendant implies taking good care of parents. [...] Taking good care of parents leads to respecting an ancestor.¹³

As is clearly shown in this passage, one responsibility is for a descendant, i.e. future-oriented and the other is for an ancestor or past-oriented. Naturally, a good and the most familiar example of the former would be parents' responsibility for children, while that of the latter would be such responsibility as they, the parents, have for their own old age parents insofar as they are their children. Hence, unless I am mistaken, the reason why we owe a duty to future generations can eventually be thought to be the same as the ground of parental responsibility. If so, what is this ground? I think that John Locke made a classic and very interesting response to this question from Judeo-Christian perspective:

From him [=Adam] the World is peopled with his Descendants, who are all born Infants, weak and helpless, without Knowledge or Understanding. But to supply the Defects of this imperfect State, till the Improvement of Growth and Age hath removed them, Adam and Eve, and after them all Parents were, by the Law of Nature, under an obligation to preserve, nourish, and educate the Children, they had begotten, not as their own Workmanship, but the Workmanship of their own Maker, the Almighty, to whom they were to be accountable for them.¹⁴

Here I find two points in Locke's view of parental responsibility: 1. Parents are «accountable» for their children *to* «the Almighty», namely

13 *Book of Rites (Liji 禮記)*, chap. 16: «Great Treatise» (Dazhuan 大傳): 〇 〇 〇 [...]親親故尊祖」(my translation).

14 LOCKE 1967 [1690], 323 (partial emphasis in original).

God. And this is because God fully delegates custody of children to their parents who are God's «workmanship» as well as they are ('Delegation-claim'). 2. It is since children are the workmanship not of parents but of God that their parents are responsible for them. In other words, parental responsibility implies that parents, as long as they are God's delegates at present, should bring up and be responsible for those who will be delegated in the next generation and then should, in turn, be responsible for their own successor who will be delegated in the generation after next, etc. ('Responsibility-for-Responsibility-claim').

To summarize, according to Locke, these two claims are the gist of the ground of parental responsibility. However, if we apply his idea *mutatis mutandis* to the question of why we owe a duty to future generations, then a question arises: Doesn't Locke's discussion suggest that we human beings alone cannot lay the groundwork for our own survival but, for this purpose, need inevitably set something else that transcends us and delegates the responsibility for next generation's future-oriented responsibility to us – no matter whether it is God in the sense of Judeo-Christianity or not? At the same time, another question is also hit upon in our time after Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism: Is this 'something' really worth being 'transcendent' for us, although it is only 'set' *by us* as a means to the end of our survival? Thus the WQ2 seems to lead us finally to a new question – How is it possible for us to be something's delegate without setting it for ourselves and for our own sake? In concluding, I would like to answer this question briefly.

5. Conclusion

As suggested in the above passage from *Book of Rites*, our future-oriented responsibility 'implies' our past-oriented responsibility. According to my interpretation, this means: We are responsible *for* future people only if we are responsible *to* past generations who

delegated the very future-oriented responsibility to us.

Metaphorically speaking, human beings have been passing a baton of responsibility from the beginning of human history to today – Now it is our turn to hand it over.

References

- ANDERS, G. 2011. *Die Zerstörung unserer Zukunft. Ein Lesebuch* (ed. by B. Lassahn). Zurich: Diogenes.
- ANSELM OF CANTERBURY 1979 [1077]. *St. Anselm's Proslogion* (tr. by M.J. Charlesworth). Notre Dame / London: University of Notre Dame Press.
- APEL, K.-O. 1973. *Transformation der Philosophie* Vol. II : *Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- 1988: *Diskurs und Verantwortung. Das Problem des Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
 - 2004: «Die ökologische Krise als Herausforderung für die Diskursethik». In D. Böhler, J.P. Brune, (eds.), *Orientierung und Verantwortung. Begegnungen und Auseinandersetzungen mit Hans Jonas*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann.
- HUME, D. 1992 [1739]. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- KANT, I. 1992 [1787]. *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr. by N.K. Smith). Houndmills / London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- LOCKE, J. 1967 [1690]. *Two Treatises of Government* (ed. by P. Laslett). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.