

Think

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ON FUTURE PEOPLE

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It is no longer socially-acceptable to exhibit prejudice against ethnic minority people on grounds of their ethnicity, women on grounds of their gender, or working-class people on grounds of their class. The last bastions of discrimination are being overcome: such as prejudice against gay and lesbian people, and against disabled people. ...Or, is there one more, crucial bastion of discrimination still strongly in place?

Take this kind of remark, that I have heard on an alarming number of occasions in casual or dinner-party conversation, and perhaps you have too: 'I don't really care about what happens after I'm dead and gone.' We might dismiss this as the attitude just of some old curmudgeon, and think that it is of no moral or political consequence. But: *it directly implies not caring about future people*, the next generation(s). How would we react if someone said to us, 'I just don't care about what happens to black people' or 'I just don't care about what happens to disabled people'? I take it that we would be singularly appalled.

Philosophy can explain why, quite simply. If we ought to care as much for people separated from us only by identity, or by space, then the same is true for people separated from us only by time. Future people count, too. Their lives matter just as much.

Of course, most readers of THINK probably wouldn't dream of endorsing the extreme remark cited above. But what about this: 'No-one is going to infringe on my rights! I can drive or fly as much as I like. That's freedom!' This kind of sentiment, in one way or another, is widespread these days; you can find it all over the blogosphere at the

drop of a hat. It is a product of the extreme individualism of our times. Now think what it implies: Because of an unwillingness to tolerate ‘infringements’ on one’s own ‘liberty’, one is willing to take many things that future people might need. We don’t any longer tolerate stamping on the life-chances – effectively, on the faces – of black people, working-class people, disabled people... Why then do we have any respect at all for the person who prizes their own ‘freedom’ above the right of future people to have a decent life, or indeed any life at all?

I suggest that the answer is: because we haven’t fully *thought through* yet that future people deserve to be well-treated and must be decently provided for, just as children and severely disabled people (and so on and so forth) must be. Just because we can’t hear the cries of anguish of our descendants yet to come, doesn’t mean that they don’t count... On the contrary – it just makes it all the more urgent that we make the effort to think and care about them...

Yes, we have got somewhat better about caring about people who are *spatially* distant from us – people in the ‘developing’ world. The increased power of broadcast media technology has been helpful here. But: there just ain’t any such thing as beaming pictures back to us from the future. *That* has to be left up to films such as ‘The Age of Stupid’ or ‘Children of Men’. We are still just not good enough about caring about people who are *temporally* distant from us. Future people.

Nor is this even just a failure of the political Right. Many ‘socialists’ too seem markedly more interested in the poor of the ‘developing’ world and in the working class (and in enriching them materially) than in future people. But if equality – the central value of socialism – is to *mean* anything at all, then it must apply to future people too. Industrial-growthism is no good, if it means by implication that we fail to take the rights and needs of future people seriously. We should treat them *as our equals*. So it is now clear: any real socialism *must* be an eco-socialism.

77 I think that the considerations above explain some of the
78 current epidemic of manmade-climate-change denialism,
79 which is a striking phenomenon now especially on the pol-
80 itical right (e.g. in Britain: in UKIP, the BNP, the DUP, and
81 across swathes of the Tory Party) and in the right-wing
82 media (e.g. the *Mail*, the *Express*, the *Telegraph*). The
83 debate over manmade climate change is a proxy for a
84 debate over differing visions of society: for the green move-
85 ment, of a better, more localised world; for the ‘conserva-
86 tive’ Right, of unabated ‘freedom’ now (whatever the
87 consequences for future people?). But it is vital to note that
88 the ‘conservative’ vision is rarely honest with us: few ‘con-
89 servative’ politicians dare openly to acknowledge that the
90 consequences of unmitigated uncaring ‘freedom’ (to burn,
91 to consume, to fly, etc) now *are* highly likely to be mass
92 disaster later. And so they hide behind a tragic refusal to
93 acknowledge the climate science that greens (and most of
94 the left), by contrast, can and do honestly embrace. Thus:
95 the simple reality is of course that the science in practice
96 does support one side in the debate, and not the other.

97 And even those benighted readers who have not
98 grasped the nettle of our breaching of the limits to growth –
99 first with CFCs, and now much more consequentially with
100 CO₂ – must accept at least this: that if we fail to act pre-
101 cautionarily on reining in manmade climate change, then we
102 are at least, without doubt, imposing systemic *uncertainty*
103 on future people. Imposing on them unacceptable uncer-
104 tainty and insecurity about their future, and about whether
105 they (and *their* children) will even have a future. . .

106 Some philosophers (famously, Derek Parfit) think that,
107 because we don’t know exactly what future people there
108 will be, then we cannot wrong them. My answer to Parfit’s
109 famous objection is: just because future people are in
110 some sense amorphous, doesn’t mean that they aren’t in
111 another sense perfectly concrete. They will exist (unless
112 we commit the greatest crime of all) – we just don’t know
113 exactly *who* ‘they’ are yet. . . But just because you don’t
114 know who the victims of a crime will be, doesn’t mean that

the crime is any less. And if the potential victims are in your care – as our children are, and as future people are – then that makes any such crime even worse, even more contemptible. Not to be contemplated. . .

The next great leap forward in seeking justice in this world, and seeking to put in place an ethic of real responsibility and care, will be to take seriously the claims of the future ones. It is no longer possible in the courts to treat other human beings as property, to ignore their rights: slavery is long gone. In countries such as Spain, Switzerland, and New Zealand, such real rights and protections (not mere welfarist gestures – See <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/> – which keep animals’ property-status in place) are now being extended to great apes, and to some extent to other animals. There has even been weighty discussion, for over a generation now, of the strong arguments in favour of giving legal standing – real rights – to plants and (more generally and more crucially) to ecosystems and some actual movement in this direction this year, in Ecuador.

We will not flourish as a species unless our ecosystems flourish. I believe that it is high time for future people to be given the kinds of rights and protections that present people – black or white, gay or straight, abled or disabled – already take for granted. *Our human descendants* need to be granted legal standing. This will protect them, and will offer some significant protection – probably, much better protection than any we currently have in place – for ecosystems.

A tentative start has been made, for instance in Hungary with their bringing in a Commissioner for Future Generations, a sort of ombudsman with the interests of future people in mind. But this is only the most tentative of starts. . .

For, if you are against prejudice against ethnic minority people, women, etc. – and you surely are – then it is time to take up the same attitude toward the people of the future. If you believe in justice, if you care about people – and you

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153 certainly do – then it is time to get behind the idea of being
154 unprejudiced against future people. Let us not take refuge,
155 tacitly or explicitly, in this prejudice, ever again. Ending this
156 prejudice will mean a revolution in our practices. It will save
157 our civilisation.

158 Future people are coming; and when they arrive, if we
159 haven't created a decent world for them, boy are they
160 going to be mad... Future people may bite back – our chil-
161 dren and grandchildren may seek financial restitution from
162 us, if we let them down catastrophically...

163 But that isn't why we should take future people seriously.
164 We should take them seriously because it is only right to
165 do so, and anything less is not just unjust, it is uncaring,
166 and unworthy of us... The Existentialist philosopher and
167 novelist Jean-Paul Sartre warned us during a previous
168 great crisis – the rise of Nazism – against seeking for a
169 'reprieve' from facing up to our responsibilities. We need to
170 stop hoping for a reprieve. There will be no reprieve; every
171 delay just makes things worse for the future people, and
172 (by extension) for us.

173 We need to start fighting the climate war now. Anything
174 less simply connotes an unjust discrimination against future
175 people. Philosophers should lead the way, in making clear
176 that prejudice against future people can be acceptable no
177 longer.

178 And: this might just be the most powerful rhetorical tool
179 at our disposal yet to have emerged... For when you talk
180 this through with ordinary people, they *get* it. No-one wants
181 any more to be prejudiced. If we can get folk to see that to
182 be the unprejudiced 'liberal-minded' people they want to
183 think of themselves as being, they have to start treating the
184 future – future people – very differently, then another world
185 really may be possible...

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