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ETHICS OF A GREEN FUTURE

A research agenda

Marcus Düwell and Karsten Klint Jensen

Introduction

The aim of this book has been to investigate, quite comprehensively and in an interdisciplinary setting, our long-term responsibilities from a rights-based perspective. One can see three recurring topics.

First, long-term responsibility implies that we have to face a fundamental uncertainty: we simply don't know the future and thinking about our responsibilities should start with this insight (particularly Chapters 3 and 4). However, we *can* know specific biological and ecological constraints within which the future may develop, and we *are* aware of the biological and anthropological conditions of human life and the needs that have to be fulfilled to enable human beings to lead a human life. All relevant ethical considerations have to take those constraints into account. But we cannot know what consequences climate change in detail will have, nor can we know how social life and political institutions will develop. We have to develop views and models regarding the future that take these uncertainties into account and we have to wonder what kind of normative commitments we may have in light of this unknown future.

Second, long-term responsibilities have a clear collective dimension, ultimately a global dimension. This implies that thinking about long-term responsibilities has to involve rethinking the structures of political decision-making and other governance structures (Chapter 10); it also involves thinking about the psychology of human beings living in those institutions and who ultimately are the driving forces of decision-making (Chapter 9). The necessary coordination in meeting our long-term responsibilities concerning the climate will only be possible as an integrated part of these structures. This means that we have to investigate the connections between the international political and legal institutions and the way the economy works (Chapters 7 and 8) in order to understand how these

structures are related to motives human beings may have concerning long-term responsibilities.

This implies, *third*, that the details of these responsibilities are dependent on further questions regarding citizenship, inclusion, democratic participation and global human rights (Chapters 2, 5 and 6). This book has worked from a rights-based perspective which emphasises that political institutions have to be built on respect for the rights of individuals, on the rule of law and legitimate democratic procedures – the starting points on which the international normative order is built (at least in theory). But in light of the discussions in this book it seems clear that such a rights-based ethics will have to be developed much further if it is to be capable of providing convincing normative answers to the current ecological challenges.

It is clear that this book has opened a lot of issues that lead to further questions. It will be the task of this concluding chapter to outline some further lines of discussion and academic research on the bases of those considerations. The chapter will: discuss foundations of a future-oriented rights-based approach (section 1); sketch some questions regarding the political dimension of the topic (section 2); discuss the ethical significance of risk and uncertainty (section 3); outline how those questions are related to issues of more general cultural and philosophical significance (section 4); and conclude with some methodological issues regarding the appropriate form of an ethical debate (section 5).

1 An ethics of rights?

The current book has taken a rights-based ethics as a normative starting point for its investigation. This starting point has various advantages: it is firmly embedded in the current national legal systems and in international law; it is furthermore an approach which is compatible with many theories of justice in so far as they assume that in a just society equal rights should be respected. The idea that human beings have equal rights is also deeply embedded in political theory of the last centuries, not only in Western countries, but also in the movements of protest and emancipation in non-Western countries. The critique of racist and colonialist traditions is based on the idea that all human beings deserve equal respect. It seems therefore natural to ask what kind of duties with regard to the future would follow from such an ethics. To think about duties to future generations in terms of ‘rights’, however, makes it necessary to rethink dominant interpretations of the traditional notion of a ‘right’. This deserves further consideration and research; we shall mention some issues here.

First, it would have to make sense in the first place to have duties towards people that do not yet exist and whose identity we do not know. This appears to imply a certain impersonal or generic understanding of a right. But if we assume that the entire human rights regime is based on the idea that the dignity of all human beings, regardless of their identity, requires our respect and should be promoted, it seems clear that this would hold also for future people. In that case, the mere

anticipation of their existence would create duties for us. Those duties would be concerned with the life opportunities and interests of future people. They are part of the idea of 'sustainable development', as understood in the Brundtland definition: a development that respects the needs of future people.

A *second* revision is concerned with the ideas that there are only a few negative rights with 'absolute' authority, such as rights that protect human beings against torture, genocide, arbitrary violation of privacy, enslavement, deprivation etc. A duty to respect the dignity of future humans appears to involve a broader scope of rights, which the current generation actually can infringe. This, however, is not a strange revision. The entire contemporary human rights-regime and national constitutions are implicitly built on this assumption. But a broader scope of rights only appears plausible if those rights are not all on the same level of importance. Hence, it must be possible to prioritise rights and assign them different weight. However, this also opens up space for trade-offs which rights are supposed to protect against. So there is a challenge for the revised notion of rights to find a non-arbitrary ways to restrict possible trade-offs.

Third, another revision has to do with the normally shared assumption that rights have to be seen as individual rights only. However, there are some important issues about the possibility of 'collective rights'. Consider, for instance, goods that are important for ethnic identities, and situations where we have to ask whether rights to those goods can legitimately restrict the exercise of individual liberties in order to protect ethnic or other collective entities to maintain their traditional way of life. We will not go into the details of those debates because they are not the topic of this volume. But (as discussed in Chapter 2) there are some collective goods necessarily implied by the idea of individual rights. If a human being has the right to exercise his basic liberties and not be vulnerable to arbitrary interventions of others, there might be a right which protects the ecological circumstances that are required for being able to exercise these basic liberties. It seems that the entire idea of a sustainable development implies that we have certain rights to ecological conditions that are important for the life of human beings and that, correlatively, other agents have duties to refrain from damaging those conditions. This cannot mean that human beings are condemned to do nothing at all – because most of our activities will be accompanied by negative effects on the environment – but it would certainly be a reason for restricting those activities that have particularly high costs for the important aspects of the environment.

It must be further discussed what these considerations will imply for our understanding of political institutions, but we should emphasise that this overview of issues is only a sketch. However, we strongly believe that it is important for the human rights discourse to take the entire idea of rights of future people seriously. If the human rights regime and rights-based legal system is not able to provide orientation with regard to the ecological challenges, this implies that they are not really able to function as an orientation for the challenges of the future – they are normative models of the past. So far, we have no reason to assume that this is the case. It is, however, clear from the outset that it would require some

methodological revisions of the current philosophical notions of human rights, namely the strict opposition between a practical approach to human rights on the one hand and a more natural rights-based approach on the other hand (see Chapter 2). The way we propose to understand rights here is not restricted to existent human rights practices, but it is an attempt to reconstruct presuppositions that are incorporated in the human rights idea, and to elaborate the implications of those presuppositions. This does not mean that human rights have to be understood as a kind of earthly representation of an eternal natural law-idea. Likewise, it does not presuppose any form of moral realism. Instead, we propose to critically reflect on the presupposition behind the practice of ascribing rights to human beings and try to understand how this practice should be developed in a world that is characterised by challenges other than those that were dominant when the current legal practices were formulated.

2 Our understanding of politics and political institutions

If we understand the duties towards future people in terms of rights, the implications for those duties within the political order will have to be investigated. It should not just be an arbitrary decision of the current generation to protect the interests of future people or to decide not to do so – it should be an essential element of the normative self-understanding of political institutions. This would appear to imply that the protection of the basic life conditions of future people should be integrated in the hardware of political institutions; it should be part of the institutional setting itself. When political institutions develop mechanisms to ensure the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups, and ensure that political majorities cannot infringe upon those rights, they would also have to ensure that the life conditions of future people are protected.

One possibility is to develop a concept of citizenship that includes future generations. By doing so, future people can be granted a normative status within the political system, and this status would have to be respected by the current generation. Current citizens would be entitled to take decisions about matters that are important for them in so far as those decisions do not seriously harm the life conditions of future people. All decisions that would have a significant impact on future people would need justification. It is hard to see how we do not already implicitly assume that future people have such standing. Furthermore, this is supported by the simple insight that there are no strict borderlines between generations: generations are overlapping and continuously developing. A position that regards citizenship limited to the present living generation could not ignore the dynamics and fluent character of political responsibility. To regard it as an arbitrary decision of current people whether to care about future people is not really consistent in the first place. We hope that there will be more discussion in political philosophy on this subject.

If this possibility makes sense, it raises the further question of how future people and their basic interests can have a safe place in the political system (see Chapter 6). If we have rights-based duties to respect the interests of future people, it is

important to ensure that those interests are protected on a structural basis, independent of changing political majorities. The existing proposals about this topic are so far in a rather embryonic stage. We think that there are important reasons for a more intense discussion concerning how a representation of future generations could and should look like.

However, this raises a challenge for democratic institutions. It will likely lead to the political process becoming more dependent on technocrats and their assessments, and will it make it more difficult for policymakers and for citizens to have influence on those technocratic processes. Also, it will mean that political decisions will have to deal with a lot of questions concerning probabilities, risks and uncertainties. Citizens would need a lot of 'empowerment' by intermediary institutions, education, new forms of participation to be able to intervene in this process. The danger is of course that the current erosion of political institutions would only be intensified by an amplification of technocratic processes.

Many topics currently politically discussed have significant impact on the future, ranging from the introduction of new technologies, energy use, housing, food habits and travelling to procreation. To treat all such topics as requiring that political decisions on them would not have severely harmful consequences for future people may not leave much room for political decision-making in the first place. It requires continuous assessment of the long-term effects of decisions, an assessment of the uncertainties and risks accompanied by those decisions, etc. A morally acceptable form of politics requires not only that citizens can trust the experts that provide them with the relevant information about fact and forecast. It also requires a sophisticated form of interpretation of the significance of risks and uncertainties for the life conditions and interests of citizens, and a framework that allows us to understand the impact of such (partly speculative and uncertain) information on our normative commitments. We will come back to this in the next section. Moreover, the entire tendency for a morally globalised and international form of politics and the tendency to form political institutions on higher levels (e.g. Europe, the UN) is not only driven by the interests of economic actors but is to some extent also necessary from the perspective of sustainable governance. This also has the danger that it may enforce a more technocratic form of politics with higher distance from citizens.

From a normative perspective this is quite an ambivalent picture. On the one hand one could say that it is the price of technological progress. If we choose to make our life easier, richer or more exciting with specific technologies (and there are normative reasons to do so), we need a higher level of control and a more technocratic system to deal with the consequences of those technologies (and there are also normative reasons for that). On the other hand, as citizens significantly forfeit influence on political decisions and it becomes increasingly more difficult to decide important political matters by ourselves, this is, from a normative point of view, problematic. The gap between those matters that are discussed in the political sphere and the matters that would have to be disputed if one were to regulate matters of long-term responsibilities is growing. We already see a growing number

of citizens not taking part in any form of political decision-making, particularly in elections. But if citizens are not participating in political debates in the first place, it is unlikely that they will be committed to the predicament of future people. Nudging people to act sustainably without deliberation is perhaps effective and to some extent morally required. But nudging cannot compensate this lack of political commitment. From the perspective of democracy, it is normatively dubious to have a central dimension of political decision-making that develops to a great extent outside the awareness of a great part of citizenry.

All these observations are far from original or new – governance scholars have observed them for a long time. But the normative significance is not sufficiently acknowledged in ethical debates. If a life in accordance with the normative requirements of respect for the interests of future generations is only possible with a high level of technocratic governance that would exclude significant parts of the citizenry from the political process we would have a serious moral problem. It should be a central aspect of the normative debates in political philosophy.

Respect for the basic rights of people requires likewise that we ensure that future people are able to live an autonomous life and that current people are able to decide themselves about basic aspects of their life. Hence, there is a duty to implement democratic institutions worldwide for future generations to inherit.

3 Prediction, risk and uncertainty

It has been emphasised in this book at various places that an ethics of long-term responsibilities is confronted by fundamental risks and uncertainties. While it is uncontested that climate change is in the first instance the result of human activity, there is a significant level of uncertainty about the ecological consequences of climate change. We can make some models and work with different scenarios, but we can only predict to a degree what the consequences of climate development in different parts of the world will look like. This uncertainty of the level of biology and ecology will have further consequences concerning uncertainty from social and political perspectives. Depending on climate development, certain regions of the world will be very inhospitable; perhaps it will be impossible to live there. Parts of the Middle East will perhaps be too hot to live in, some African regions – which at the same time are expected to have a high level of population growth – may become very dry, Northern Europe may warm up or – depending on e.g. the behaviour of the Gulf Stream – cool down. Those possible developments will have all kinds of consequences for the possibilities of human beings to live in those regions, it will affect their behaviour, migration, economic activities and technological patterns. Depending on the development of the climate in Europe e.g. people will have very different needs concerning housing, food production and cultural habits, and different technological paths will be needed to fulfil those needs. Each approach to an ethics of long-term responsibilities will have to deal with such unpredictability and uncertainties on different levels. We mention here four relevant implications.

First, as Chapter 4 outlined, it is fundamental to ask what methods we use to predict the future. Chapter 4 makes a case for models that try to be as inclusive and self-reflexive as possible. We have to be aware that all models depend on specific conceptual presuppositions which determine the kind of information we are to take into account. The current trend of selecting models on the basis of whether they are amenable to computer simulation counteracts such a self-reflexive trend. The complexity of ecological systems makes it, however, necessary to work with methodologies with awareness of their conceptual presuppositions, being able to understand how those presuppositions are filtering information and excluding other information and that are permanently able to rethink those exclusion mechanisms. The choice of mechanisms for prediction are also relevant in an ethical perspective since those models determine to which extent we are able to integrate a normative perspective in the first place.

Second, this uncertainty of the future also requires some new ways of thinking about the future. We need to some extent overcome traditional ways of predictions that are primarily extrapolations of current trends into the future. If we expect that in the future some characteristics of our ecological circumstances will change, this will have unexpected impacts on certain regions of the world and on the life people were used to. It requires creativity and imagination to figure out what kind of future will be possible and what life might look like. That does not mean that human beings have just to adapt to all kinds of ecological changes; if we imagine the future, this can also be a strong reason for restraints when it comes to significant ecological changes. But it is necessary to use the creative potential that human beings are capable of to develop views on the future to understand the complexities of ecological and social interrelationships. Normative assessments of our actions should be based not just on facts in idealised models but on concrete anticipations of possible future developments that try to understand the complex interrelationship of possible future developments. And we should use our creativity to figure out what different models of a social, economic and political life might look like.

Third, to deal with those uncertainties requires also political institutions that are capable of such learning processes. It would be necessary to have institutions that are capable of dealing with uncertainties and to work under the awareness that we are not capable of fully understanding the ecological and social complexities of climate change. The challenge is here that those political institutions would have to realise various expectations at the same time. They should be able to anticipate long-term consequences, they must be capable of learning processes, they must work on an international or even global level to have sufficient influence and at the same time it must be possible to democratically control them. At the moment, it is hard to see how current political institutions can be transformed in a way that they are capable of fulfilling all of these expectations.

Fourth, uncertainties and risks were also discussed in Chapter 3 (rights and risks) and Chapter 8 (economy). It is clear that an ethics of a green future would have to have a stance with regard to risk and uncertainties. This is at the moment the case

to a very limited degree. A particular problem is in this context that a lot of moral philosophers would assume that a rights-based approach would be incapable right from the beginning to deal with those questions. According to various philosophers, a rights-based approach would have to be blind to the consequences of actions and would protect individual liberties, irrespective of the (short or long-term) consequences. Against those prejudices this volume has proposed revisions which also indicate how a rights-based ethics could deal with questions of risks and uncertainties. It should be clear right now that this discussion is of utmost importance for the prospects of an ethics of a green future. If a rights-approach is not capable of dealing with risks, this implies that the current normative frameworks that national constitutions and international law presuppose are fundamentally unfit to deal with climate change. The challenge is to reformulate those frameworks in a way that they are able to incorporate a dimension of risk and uncertainty.

4 Implications for our moral and practical self-understanding in general

We have already seen that broadening the scope of ethical debates to the future is not only a challenge for technology and the organisation of governmental processes, it also affects the understanding of basic concepts like human rights, citizenship and political institutions. It would be a wrong picture if we would think about questions of intergenerational justice in the way that we know criteria to measure whether a distribution of goods, opportunities and chances are fair and now we only have to apply these criteria on future people as well. Such an idea of fair distribution would presuppose an Archimedean position from which we would be able to oversee the entire history and assess how criteria for fair distribution could work. But we are not in this position atop of history, we are subjects within a historical process. We have to consider how to relate to a future that is unknown and one for which we do not have the knowledge for such a fair distribution. It is fundamental to reconsider our moral outlook on the world, political institutions and central aspects of modern life in a way that ensure that options to shape the future in a humane way will remain open.

This openness for the future will, however, not be independent of any kind of world views. Human beings have always developed views about the future, they have imagined apocalyptic scenarios, peaceful pictures of salvation and eternal peace or have interpreted the cosmos in terms of recurring historical cycles. These views are not only a relic of pre-modern times; in modernity people have also interpreted the world in terms of a teleological view on historical progress, have dreamed of a dialectics in the development of history, have thought in terms of the 'fall of the occident', have thought in terms of historical necessity, in terms of progress or decline. Human beings have developed a grand picture of historical processes and those pictures have influenced their interpretation of the world and their actions. It is inevitable that human beings develop views about history, to have patterns of interpretation that allow them to make sense of their actions.

Those interpretations necessarily go beyond that which human beings can know. We cannot know the future but nevertheless we have to relate to this broader horizon under which we act, even if we would be completely agnostic with regard to the future. Even such agnosticism would already be a very specific attitude towards the future and concerning this attitude like all other possible attitude we would have to show that it is an appropriate one. If due to current ecological challenges we extend our moral considerations to the future, we have to take all those broader questions into considerations. Specific views on history will influence the way we think about responsibility for the future. If we knew that the apocalypse was imminent, we would have no reason to worry about the long-term effects of our actions. And those interpretations are deeply embedded in broader cultural outlooks of the world, a cyclic interpretation of history will differ from a teleological view.

Emphasising the relevance of those bigger interpretations of history is not pleading for cultural relativism. We can – on the contrary – ask whether we have moral reasons for embracing or rejecting specific views on history. If we have good moral reasons to respect future people and to ensure safe life conditions for them, this could also mean that we have reasons to reject specific forms of historical determinism and develop instead an attitude of hope with regard to the future. If the future is open and unknown to us, it is morally important to take a critical look at world views that pretend to have comprehensive knowledge about the future. But if it is correct that moral duties regarding the future are interrelated to the way we think about the future, then it is difficult to avoid taking about those bigger philosophical questions about the place of human beings in the world and in history. A tendency in modern political philosophy to claim that moral and political convictions should be neutral with regard to comprehensive views on the world, should be at least again a topic of discussion. Perhaps the pretention of neutrality is difficult to defend, and it should be the task of debates of the ethics of long-responsibilities to discover new ways of discussing those broader comprehensive views. This is not to say that we should go back to the 1960s and discuss ethical questions in terms of historical materialism or in terms of sin and forgiveness. But it is necessary to be aware that those broader philosophical perspectives cannot be avoided in ethical debates. And it is necessary for find forms to discuss those matters in a constructive and productive way.

5 What might an appropriate ‘ethics of the future’ look like?

This final chapter, like the entire book, attempts to outline what an appropriate attitude towards an ‘ethics of the future’ might be. Of course, the different authors of the book are themselves responsible for the approach they have chosen – and it is perhaps not necessary to stress that different authors are committed to different approaches and theoretical background convictions. But what we can see in the different discussion are steps in the direction of a philosophical attempt to take the complexity of the topic serious. We have to deal with the empirical complexities

of the topic, we have to understand the political, economic and juridical contexts in which we are shaping the future and we have to take human psychological limitations into account. An appropriate ethical discussion of the topic will not be possible if we attempt to bypass real-world complexities. And this empirical aspect of ethics is not primarily concerned with the question of how people – empirically speaking think about long-term responsibilities. Rather, the task is to aim for a comprehensive understanding of all those empirical aspects that determine the current situation in which we ask ourselves what kind of long-term responsibilities we may have.

But at the same time it is our task as philosophers to support an appropriate understanding of the normative concepts we are dealing with, the possibilities of dealing with the uncertainty of the future and the normative commitments human beings may have. And it is impossible to do justice to the problem without discussing quite fundamental questions of our understanding of politics, history and the place of human beings in the world. At the end of the day, asking ethical questions is part of the more fundamental attempts of human beings to understand what it means to be a human being. To be confronted with the question of our responsibilities with regard to the future forces us to go further with regard to the question and it is perhaps important to understand the significance of the challenge; otherwise it will be difficult to find appropriate responses to it and to find appropriate responses is perhaps one of the biggest challenges humanity is confronted with at the moment – and probably also for decades to come.