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Our obligations to future generations: the limits of intergenerational justice and the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics

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ABSTRACT
Theories of intergenerational justice are a very common and popular way to conceptualise the obligations currently living people may have to future generations. After briefly pointing out that these theories presuppose certain views about the existence, number and identity of future people, I argue that the presuppositions must themselves be ethically investigated, and that theories of intergenerational justice lack the theoretical resources to be able to do this. On that basis, I claim it is necessary to do the 'ethics of metaphysics' in order to fully comprehend what, if anything, we may owe future generations. I defend these claims against some important objections.

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1. Introduction

A popular way of understanding what we owe future generations is to conceptualise the question in terms of intergenerational justice. Sacrificing precision for brevity, the basic move can be described thus: we should figure out what (if any) rights future generations hold vis-à-vis currently living people, and we can then spell out the duties of the latter in terms of the duty to not violate those rights of the former.

In this paper, I will first show that this turn to theories of intergenerational justice presupposes certain assumptions about the existence, identity and number of future people, and that those theories can give no practical guidance without those assumptions. I then argue that the assumptions must themselves be the subject of ethical inquiry, which inquiry is one part of what I call 'the ethics of metaphysics'. I then turn to arguing that theories of justice lack the theoretical

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resources to conduct that ethical inquiry, and therefore that the toolbox of intergenerational justice needs to be supplemented if we are to develop a full and accurate picture of what we owe future generations.

I will sometimes in this paper use the problem of anthropogenic climate change to bring out certain points I make. It may be useful, therefore, to say here that this is purely for ease of exposition – the arguments, and the claims they support, apply to the general issue of what, if anything, we owe future generations. Climate change is perhaps the most important context in which this issue arises today, but it is certainly not the only one.

2. The conditionality of theories of intergenerational justice[1]

The effects of climate change will extend far into the future, long after currently living people have stopped existing. A very prominent way of understanding the ethical implications of this is to use the theoretical resources provided by theories of intergenerational justice. Shue, for instance, writes that 'rapid climate change places current and future generations in precisely the kind of general circumstances that call for the construction of rights-protecting institutions' (Shue 2011), and there are many other examples in the literature of the basic insight that underlies this approach, namely the idea that we should conceptualise all or a significant part of the potential harm caused by climate change in terms of potential violations to rights (see e.g. Bell 2011; Caney 2008, 2009, 2010; Hayward 2007; Page 2006; Vanderheiden 2008).

There are well-known problems with extending theories of justice to cover relations with future non-contemporaries (see Meyer [2015] for a description of these. See also Beckerman and Pasek [2001]; Herstein [2008] for scepticism about extending justice to cover intergenerational relations) and in this paper I am concerned with none of them. Rather, I am going to simply assume in this paper that theories of justice can be extended to cover intergenerational relations, because what I am interested in here is some of the assumptions that must necessarily be made for this extension to work.

The basic and fundamental assumption can be summed up succinctly: in order to care about the future it is necessary that there *be* a future. More specifically, theories of intergenerational justice need to make assumptions about the existence, number and identity of future agents in order to be able to say something both meaningful and useful about the obligations that currently living people have towards them. We can see this clearly using climate change as an illustrative example.

First, in order to even begin the task of identifying which future consequences of climate change will likely cause rights violations, it is necessary to assume *that* there will be agents who exist in the future at all. If there are no such agents, then nothing currently living agents do will or even could lead to rights violations of future generations.

Second, it is necessary to assume that future agents will be of a certain sort; that is to say, we need to assume what kinds of interests those agents will have. Without this assumption, we do not know which consequences will actually be agent-affecting in the future, and which consequently could potentially cause or constitute rights violations. If, for example, we cannot say of future agents that they will require what we currently think of as food to survive or flourish, then we cannot claim that actions of currently living agents that affect the ability of future agents to obtain (what we think of as) food are actions with agent-affecting future consequences.

Third, a theory of intergenerational justice needs to make assumptions about how many future people there will be. Consider, for example, the possibility that the actions of currently living people will lead to drought in the future. 'Drought', is not an agent-independent feature of the world; rather, it depends crucially on how much water there is relative to how many agents there are – what would be far too much beer for one philosopher could legitimately be described as a drought for a rugby team. So even after we claim that currently living agents have an obligation to ensure that the rights of future agents to a satisfactory amount of acceptable drinking water are not violated, on its own this claim is insufficient to translate that right into an account of the duties of currently living agents. That translation requires making an assumption about the number of future agents there will be. The same point can be made about many other potential future consequences of the actions of currently living agents. A world with 20 billion agents in the future will require much more of currently living agents than a world with a million.

This also shows that not only do theories of intergenerational justice rely on certain assumptions about the future, but they are also highly sensitive to the precise assumptions that are used. Indeed, the very same theory will say very different things depending on what it assumes about existence, identity and number. For example, in the extreme case, a theory which assumes that there will be no future agents will tell us that there are no restrictions on the actions of currently living agents qua the future consequences of those actions, while exactly the same theory will impose duties on currently living agents if it uses the assumption that there will be a future population of 15 billion people.

In other words, theories of intergenerational justice take a conditional form. The consequent is whatever the theory says the duties of (for e.g.) intergenerational justice are; the antecedent is, *if* there are future agents of a certain type and given number. If the world were to end tomorrow, from the perspective of justice there would be no point in even asking what to do about the future consequences of climate change, let alone actually doing anything about them.

3. Two features of the intergenerational justice conditional

I now want to pick out two features of the intergenerational justice conditional. The first feature can be seen by contrasting it with a different and familiar ethical conditional, namely: if there turns out to be a baby drowning in a pond, you ought to save it. This conditional tells people what they ought to do *when* the antecedent comes true. But the intergenerational justice conditional is more like: if there turns out to be a baby drowning in a pond, you ought to take swimming lessons now. This conditional tells agents to act *now* on the basis that the antecedent will at some point in the future come true.

Unlike many other conditionals, therefore, which only require sacrifice at the point when the antecedent comes true, theories of intergenerational justice which claim that currently living agents ought, for instance, to reduce their total emissions, are theories which require sacrifice from (at least some of) those agents now. That is to say, from the temporal perspective of a currently existing agent, these theories do not, in the end, make conditional claims. They make the categorical one: Act now on the basis that the metaphysical assumptions will come true.[2]

The second feature of the intergenerational justice conditional that I want to pick out is that the antecedent is something that is in principle entirely within human control: it is in principle possible for humans to collectively decide to let the human race peter out. Further, even at a more practical level, at the very least it is true that the *number* of future agents can, within certain limits, be a matter of human choice. This choice, we have seen, makes an enormous difference to what any given theory will understand as the agent-affecting consequences of climate change, and consequently what it will see as the problem, and consequently what it will tell us we ought to do about that problem.

4. The ethics of metaphysics

The name 'the ethics of metaphysics' is my term of art to cover a number of questions, all of which are specific variants of one basic question (see Jonas [1984] and Heyd [1994] for what in my view is the best work on both identifying and discussing many of the issues in the ethics of metaphysics). While absolutely nothing of substance turns on my use of this term of art, it would be well to briefly explain why I chose it.[3] It is not straightforward to give a non-trivial and uncontroversial description of what the subject matter of metaphysics is (see van Inwagen and Sullivan 2016). This means that not everyone will agree on what counts as a metaphysical question. It also means, however, that it is defensible to hold that one of the questions of metaphysics is: why is there something rather than nothing? The ethics of metaphysics introduces an ethical element, because it asks: why *should* there be something rather than nothing? And, if we decide there should be something rather than nothing, what should there be?

In the context this paper is concerned with, i.e. future generations, this means the following three questions:[4]

(a) Should there be agents in the future?
(b) How many agents should there be?
(c) What kinds of agents should there be?

These three questions are generated simply by turning the assumptions about the existence, number and identity of future people into objects of ethical inquiry. I now turn to arguing that it is necessary to do the ethics of metaphysics if we are to develop a properly comprehensive understanding of our ethical relation to the future, and to future generations.

5. Why we need to do the ethics of metaphysics

In this section, I give two important reasons for why it is necessary to ethically investigate and justify any particular assumptions that theories of intergenerational justice make about the existence, identity and number of future people; why, in other words, we must do the ethics of metaphysics.

First, as we have seen, theories of intergenerational justice must make assumptions about future population in order to say something meaningful and reasonably determinate about our obligations to future generations. These assumptions are not given facts about the future that must simply be accepted. Rather, their truth is in principle under entirely human control. It is the choices we make, through collective population policies and individual procreative decisions, which determine whether there will be people in the future, and how many of them there will be.

As we have seen above, theories of intergenerational justice demand sacrifice of currently living agents *now* on the basis of those assumptions, for e.g. the claim that currently living people have a duty to reduce emissions, despite the associated decline in welfare, because of the likely effects of unchecked emitting on future generations. But given that whether the assumptions come true is under human control, it is entirely legitimate for an agent to ask: 'Why should I accept the ethical necessity of making these sacrifices? The sacrifices you require me to make are only necessary if there will be future agents. And not only am I am not going to make any future agents, I think there shouldn't be any future agents at all'.[5] The point is not that this response cannot be addressed, the point is that *it needs to be addressed*: if you are going to ask an agent to sacrifice something now, for the sake of a future she not only does not want to create but thinks ought not to be created, you have to somehow justify to her that it is worth bringing that future about, and it is worth enough for her to be required to make sacrifices for its sake

The second reason for the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics stems from the transformed condition of human action, and in particular its enormously

increased power. As Jonas (1984) points out, 'with certain developments of our powers the *nature of human action* has changed' (1), and one of the changes he has in mind is the ability human beings now have to decide (in the extreme case) whether 'there will be a world for the generations of man to come' (10). Heyd reiterates the truth and ethical importance of this claim, when he states that

> replenishing the earth with people is no longer just a natural practice over which individuals and societies have little discretion. It has become a major ethical dilemma due to a whole new repertory of options out of which people can and have to choose … for the first time in human history the future *existence* of humanity as such has become a matter of choice. (Heyd 1994, 8)

The argument here is very simple: Power brings responsibility in its wake, and our powers over the existence and fate of the world come with some responsibility. At the very least, this is the responsibility of being able to justify an entirely 'irresponsible' use of it. And it is ultimately impossible to do that, or to determine what would be responsible use, without asking the fundamental questions asked by the ethics of metaphysics. Even when someone makes the assumption that there will be no future agents, for example, and concludes therefore that we may use our powers however we like, it is necessary to ask: is that right? Or should we make it the case that humanity will continue to exist?

To my mind, each of these two reasons taken on their own constitute a strong independent case for the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics. In case some find the second more convincing than the first, it may be worth explicitly noting here that the second argument makes no reference to sacrifices imposed on currently living people, and can therefore be accepted even if the first is rejected. I have tried to suggest, however, that both should be accepted.

A selective summary is in order before proceeding. The two main claims at this point in the paper are that (i) theories of intergenerational justice rely on assumptions about the existence, number and identity of future generations; and (ii) these assumptions must be made the object of direct ethical inquiry, i.e. we must do the ethics of metaphysics. I now turn to arguing that theories of intergenerational justice lack the theoretical resources to properly ethically investigate the assumptions they rely on.

6. Justice and the ethics of metaphysics: Why theories of intergenerational justice cannot deal adequately with questions in the ethics of metaphysics

The first question in the ethics of metaphysics, as it is outlined here, concerns the continued existence of humanity. It concerns whether that continued existence is valuable, and if it is, how valuable it is in relation to other values. My claim in the rest of this paper is that theories of intergenerational justice lack the theoretical resources to allow us to properly answer this question. This theoretical

poverty of justice can be illustrated by considering what it can tell us about whether we have a duty to ensure the continued existence of humanity.

On the understanding that justice is a person-affecting value, justice applies to relations between people (a) once they exist or (b) on the assumption that they will exist. This means that justice cannot ground a duty of currently living people *to* future agents to bring them into existence. It is clear, I think, that justice cannot ground such a duty. It is clear because 'the nonexistent makes no demands and can therefore not suffer violation of its rights. It may have rights when it exists, but it does not have them by virtue of the mere possibility that it will one day exist. *Above all, it has no right to exist at all before it in fact exists.* The claim to existence begins only with existence' (Jonas 1984, 39. My emphasis). Indeed, it is misleading (but unavoidable) to say things like 'the nonexistent has no right to exist', because the grammar of the sentence suggests that the non-existent is a subject of some kind. It is not. 'It' is nothing. Attributing anything, let alone a right, to nonexistence is not just wrong, but incoherent.

The key point about nothing is that it is not a thing – it is the absence of things. As Kolakowski (2001) says, '"Nothingness" is no more than an illicit substantive formed from the particle of negation – the simple and useful word No.' (16). It's language that's deceiving us here – because 'nothing' can be the subject and object of sentences, we can slide into thinking it is something. And of course, that is precisely what nothing is not.

This is not the sceptical claim that 'future generations – of unborn people – cannot be said to have any rights,' (Beckerman and Pasek 2001, 14) nor, specifically, scepticism about future agents having at least some of those rights vis-à-vis currently living agents (based, for e.g. on the view that the non-identity problem cannot be solved). The claim is only that 'possible future people do not have a right to existence' (Meyer 1997, 139). This is entirely compatible with believing that future people do have rights vis-à-vis currently existing agents, as long as one accepts those rights are contingent (See for example Feinberg 1974).

If this is correct, a theory of justice has two options left in attempting to ground a duty to ensure the continued existence of humanity. It can claim there is a duty of justice to ensure that there will be agents in the future either by arguing (a) that justice is impersonal in some way or (b) it is a duty of justice to currently existing agents. I begin with the impersonalist attempt.

7. Justice as an impersonal value?

There are many different ways to understand what it means for value, or a value, to be person-affecting. To begin with the most famous, Parfit describes '*The Person-Affecting View*, or *V*: It will be worse if people are affected for the worse' (Parfit 1984, 370). The idea behind this is that 'what is bad must be bad for someone' (363). There are a good number of sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, interpretations of this basic idea, its relevance, and its implications. I

do not want to enter that debate. Luckily, it isn't necessary, I think, because what I want to do here is argue that even if one holds that justice is an impersonal value, this doesn't help in allowing justice to ground duties towards making some particular ontological assumptions about the existence, identity and a number of future agents come true. For this, it is only necessary to say what it would be for justice to be impersonal, and all I will say is this: whatever else the view contains, it must contain the claim that justice has value over and above any value it may have for and/or to persons. The basic idea can be expressed like this: in a world where there were no persons, and would never be persons, justice would still be a value. This might appear to be a way for theories of justice to ground duties to make certain metaphysical assumptions come true. By claiming that the value of justice has nothing to do with people, it seems to open up the theoretical space for duties of justice which have nothing to do with people. Impersonalist theories of justice may, in other words, be able to ground a duty that there be future agents.

Before examining (and rejecting) this possibility, I want to stress again just how unusual the impersonalist view is when it comes to justice. So for instance, in a discussion of libertarianism in the context of intergenerational justice, where the authors say 'we do not attempt to defend libertarianism. Instead, we work out the most plausible version thereof and identify its implications for intergenerational justice,' (Steiner and Vallentyne 2012, 50) they pick out a particular sense of justice that they will focus on. This sense is justice as 'what we owe each other', and as is clear simply from that, they point out that 'justice as what we owe each other is not concerned with impersonal duties (duties owed to no one, i.e. that do not correspond to anyone's rights). If there are impersonal duties, then something can be just but nonetheless morally impermissible' (50–51).

This is stipulative fiat, of course, but it is still instructive, because it tells us something about how theorists of intergenerational justice understand the value of justice. Or take another example. A different pair of authors begin their paper with this question: 'What do we owe to future people as a matter of social justice?' (Meyer and Roser 2012, 219). They say that they will 'follow a broad understanding of intergenerational justice: justice considerations are relevant to decisions that are likely to affect the existence, number and identity of future people if – with respect to these decisions – future generations can be viewed as holding legitimate claims or rights against present generations, who in turn stand under correlative duties to future generations' (219). Again, on this view, justice is relevant to intergenerational relations if future people have rights against current people, and these generate correlative duties for the latter towards the former. That is to say, on this understanding too the duties of justice are duties owed by people to people.

Indeed, it is remarkably difficult to actually find an account in the literature that claims that there are impersonal duties of justice – in our context, an account which claims that there is a duty of justice that there be future people

which is not a duty owed either to future or currently living people, or both. I confess, in fact, that I don't know of even one such view.

The closest I could find to such an idea is the suggestion that 'a complete account of intergenerational justice must appeal, at least in part, to 'identity-independent' principles. Identity-independent principles evaluate acts and policies according to the extent that they promote the quality of life independently of how particular individuals fare in alternative scenarios' (Page 2006, 166). According to the author, such principles, 'when focused solely on human life … are referred to as 'impersonal' principles' (166).

Now, these may certainly be called impersonal principles if one feels like it, but they are not impersonal in the sense relevant to us. If these principles are what the impersonalist strategy uses, then it cannot generate a duty of justice that there be future people. Why not? Because these principles, while not caring about particular individuals, 'evaluate acts and policies according to the extent that they promote the quality of life'. For these principles to tell us anything about how we should act towards the future, it has to be assumed that there will be agents in the future whose quality of life can be promoted. If this is what is meant by impersonalist principles of justice, then impersonalist principles do not allow us to ground a duty of justice to make any particular set of ontological assumptions come true.

In a word, the relevant sense of impersonal is not identity-independent, but existence-independent. We are looking for a way in which principles of justice could tell us that we have a duty to make the assumption of existence (and the others) come true, not for a way in which they can tell us what we owe people assumed to exist even if their existence (and identity) is contingent on our actions. This is not done by the only candidate I know of for impersonal principles of intergenerational justice.

Here is one alternative possibility.[6] The view is this. First, we deny the claim that the duties of justice are purely duties owed by persons to persons. Second, we say that there is a second type of duty of justice. Third, we say that this is the duty that there be justice. This duty is not owed to any agents, but simply (I imagine) comes from some background duty towards the value of justice.

This background duty can be understood in terms of the natural duty of justice.[7] According to Rawls, 'the natural duty of justice … requires us to support and to comply with just institutions that exist and apply to us. It also constrains us to further just arrangements not yet established, at least when this can be done without too much cost to ourselves' (Rawls 1999, 99). Now the first part of that duty can't help us, because it deals with existing institutions as they apply to existing people. The second is where the action must be. That second part, to further just arrangements not yet established, of course makes the most sense when one assumes there will be agents in the future to whom those arrangements will apply. On this understanding, the duty to further the creation of just arrangements is really a duty to those future agents. But for our reinterpretation

here, this will not do. That second part must be understood as a duty to further just arrangements *for the sake of justice itself*.

Now, if there is such a duty, and if it is true that for the value of justice to be instantiated it is necessary that there be people, then we can derive a duty of justice that there be people. Generalising, the duty to ensure that there will be people would be understood as part of the duty to create the preconditions necessary for the value of justice to be instantiated, with the duty to create those preconditions itself derived from the duty that the value of justice be instantiated.

There are a huge number of problems with understanding this view, of course, and an even greater number with understanding why one should believe it. But my concern here is not with whether one should have this view but whether, if one has it, one can avoid the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics. I do not think one can.

The first issue is as follows. On the view outlined, the duty to bring about the preconditions of justice (including but not restricted to bringing about the existence of agents in the future) is somehow connected to the value of justice. The first question to ask is: how exactly should we understand this connection? Put another way, what does fulfilling this duty to create the circumstances of justice achieve in terms of the value of justice?

It is clear that simply securing the preconditions of justice does not guarantee that there will be justice – securing the preconditions of justice does not secure the existence of justice, it only secures the possibility of its existence. Further, securing the possibility of the existence of justice also secures the possibility of *injustice*, because the preconditions of both are the same. This I think is clear – the preconditions which secure the possibility of justice are preconditions which allow us to speak of a situation in terms of justice. And one of ways to speak of these situations in such terms is to say that the situation is unjust. That is to say, discharging the duty to bring about the preconditions of justice means creating not only a world where there could be justice, but simultaneously and necessarily also creating a world where there could be injustice.

Very well. One option now is to hold that there is a duty to bring about the preconditions of justice even though this at the same time brings about the possibility of injustice. But if this is the interpretive option taken, then the value being appealed to is not, ultimately, the value of justice. Why not? Because on this option the duty is interpreted to hold even though fulfilling it could lead to injustice. The ground of the duty must therefore lie in it creating the possibility, rather than the reality, of justice. Consequently, what is being appealed to is the value of there being a world in which there *could* be justice, not a world in which there is justice. And this appeal is a view within the ethics of metaphysics rather than theories of justice. It is a claim about what there should be which is grounded in a claim of the value of there being the possibility of value, rather than being grounded purely in a claim about the value of there being justice.

So this view, to avoid the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics, must interpret the duty in some other way. What might other interpretations be? One, I suppose, could be that the duty is to be interpreted as being a duty to bring about the preconditions of justice when doing so is associated with a higher likelihood of bringing about the existence of justice rather than injustice. But this too is a claim in the ethics of metaphysics; or at least, it presupposes such claims. Why? Because such an interpretation expresses a view on the relative weight of the existence of the value of justice versus the value (if any) of the possibility of there being value; and, as I have suggested, the latter claim is a claim in the ethics of metaphysics.

We can generalise the point thus. *Any* interpretation of the duty to bring about the preconditions of justice must recognise the fact that bringing about the preconditions of justice necessarily and simultaneously brings about the preconditions of injustice. It must recognise this because it is just a conceptual truth. But once it recognises this, it is forced to take a view on the question of whether there is a value to bringing about the possibility of value (in this case justice) – and whatever view one takes on this question will be a view within the ethics of metaphysics rather than theories of justice.

So much for impersonal theories of justice. There is one final strategy justice can try to use to ground a duty to ensure the continued existence of humanity, namely to argue that there are of duties of justice to create future agents which are owed to currently existing agents. I now turn to examining this, and to arguing that even on this strategy it is not possible to evade with the necessity of the ethics of metaphysics.

8. Duties of justice to currently living agents to ensure the continued existence of humanity

The attempt is to justify a duty of justice to currently living agents that there be a future, and of a certain sort. Clearly, any such justification will require, as a necessary but insufficient element, an account of why it matters so much to currently living agents there is this certain sort of future. This is insufficient, incidentally, because as has been pointed out,

> an individual's interest in living in a society that is open to the future in the sense specified and that allows the individual to realize her autonomy in the pursuance of projects of a specific kind is not likely to be strong enough to impose a duty on people to make her environment and society so. (Meyer 1997, 146)

That is to say, in addition to arguing that it is important to currently living agents that there be a future, it is necessary to argue that it is important enough to justify duties of justice to those agents to bring it about.

Now, there are different specific ways to argue for this view, and I think all of them share some version of a simple and powerful idea, and the specific arguments are attempts to somehow express it. That idea, in its strongest form, it is

something like this: for the present to matter, it is necessary that there is a future. In some way, the fact that there is a future confers meaning on the present (See for e.g. Heyd 1994; Meyer 1997; Scheffler 2013).

So for instance, when Thompson (2012) writes of lifetime-transcending interests and attempts to 'establish that they play an important role in the lives of individuals and the formation of their identities,' (35–36) her argument 'concentrates on two ideas: that lifetime-transcending interests are essential for a meaningful life and that they are a pre-requisite for making a rational plan of life' (36). Following Partridge, she claims that '"self-transcendence", as he calls it, gives meaning to our lives and projects, especially when we face the fact of our own mortality,' (36) and she attempts to strengthen Partridge's point by arguing that even those individuals who do not have lifetime- transcending interests are 'riding piggyback on the lifetime-transcending interests of others' (36). As an example of this, according to her, is the 'millionaire ((who)) would not get satisfaction from owning great works of art and denying them to the public gaze if he did not believe in the value of these works as important contributions to an artistic heritage' (36). The idea is that even the selfish millionaire, gloating privately over his art collection, can himself only value the art collection if he sees it as part of an activity or practice whose value and existence transcends the limits of his temporal self.

I do not want to criticise this argument as an argument; I am interested in what one must believe to believe it. And I think that one has to believe some sort of claim like the one I gave above, about the existence of the future somehow conferring meaning on the present. A different way of putting it might be to say that the underlying idea, at its most basic, is something like: life is not enough. Or, perhaps more precisely, life – understood as our temporal span – is enough only if it involves something that goes beyond its temporal span.[8]

8.1. How much future?

It is legitimate to believe that the universe is eternal, and therefore one is not compelled to believe on theoretical grounds that the human race will become extinct. The 'importance-of-the-future' strategy, however, is based on a belief that is simultaneously more stringent and less demanding than the eternal existence of humanity. The two are related – the greater stringency of the belief in one of its aspects makes it almost a requirement that it be less demanding in another.

The strategy relies on identifying particular practices and interests of particular existing agents, and arguing that the value of these practices to the agent requires temporal transcendence. That is to say, it is not enough for the strategy that the universe or the human race will endure; say the world is eternal; it must say particular practices will endure. And it would be a mistake, I think, for proponents of this strategy to require that this endurance be eternal.

History teaches us that even the most glorious accomplishments of humans, whether as individuals or societies, are subject to the vagaries of time, and in particular it tells us that virtually none of these accomplishments will last eternally. Even those that have lasted a long time have done so for breathtakingly contingent reasons: It was entirely accidental that Plato and Aristotle endured and reached us. Given this, I claim that even though it might be legitimate to believe in the eternal existence of humanity, it is illegitimate to believe that any of the particular practices of human beings now will be similarly eternal. The point is not that they will not be. Perhaps some will. The point is that the epistemically respectable attitude towards any of our particular lifetime- transcending interests is to acknowledge that they are highly unlikely to endure eternally. If one wants to continue to insist that the existence of a future containing certain practices matters from the perspective of currently living agents, this means that the value of the future to the present, whatever it is, cannot lie in the eternal endurance of certain practices. And so an obvious question arises: how much future does the present need?

Answering that question involves us in a sorites problem. We do not need eternity, but we do need some future. Where do we draw the line? This may seem like a trivial problem, but I think it has rather important implications for theories of intergenerational justice who attempt to justify their metaphysical assumptions by appealing to the importance of the future for the present. The duties they ground on this basis are in part determined by two variables: the sort of future necessary for the present, and the duration of that future. A theory which claims that one hundred years of the future are necessary to discharge one's duties to currently living agents will give us a very different idea of our duties to a theory which claims that five hundred years are necessary.

Nevertheless, to borrow from Wittgenstein, perhaps the fact that the borders between two countries are disputed does not call the separate existence of the countries themselves into question. So let us say that in some general way, it is possible to draw the boundaries, and to satisfactorily answer the question of how much future we need. Even with that local difficulty resolved, the argument that eternity is not necessary, and the allusion to the sorites problem, can begin to make us wonder: is *any* future necessary? And, secondarily, what does one have to believe in order to believe that some is?

8.2. The importance-of-the-future argument is the ethics of metaphysics

What, after all, is the future? For it to be something that could even possibly give the present meaning, it must be something like 'a continuation of the present'. Not an exact continuation, to be sure, because no one is preaching that future stagnation is necessary for present lives to have meaning; but, and perhaps

this is a better word, certainly it involves continuity. This in itself begins to hint at what I am about to claim, namely that thinking the future matters requires thinking that the present does without reference to the future.

Let us accept for the sake of the argument that the existence of a certain sort of future *is* necessary for agents to give meaning to their lives. My first point is that in order for this argument to work, it is necessary that agents' lives have meaning without reference to the future. If life – *my* life, yours, everyone's – is a tale told by several idiots simultaneously, none of them signifying anything, then how does it help that there be will be many more idiots and many more empty tales in the future? And how does it help even if they are similar idiots telling much the same stories? Unlike in mathematics, two negatives do not make a positive. Adding meaninglessness to meaningless does not create meaning. For the extension of the present to create meaning, the present *qua* present must itself have meaning.

And this is a problem. We are trying to use the argument to ground the claim that we owe duties of justice to currently existing agents that we ensure a future because of the importance of that future to those agents. But if it only works if the present is itself meaningful, then there is considerable internal tension – exactly to the extent you claim that the present is meaningful on its own terms, you correspondingly weaken the force of the claim that currently existing agents have against each other that they act in order to ensure that there is a future.

What my discussion above demonstrates is that when we argue about whether we have a duty to currently existing agents to bring a future about, what we are really arguing about is the meaning and the value of life: what it is, what we need to have it, if it matters at all that we have meaningful lives, if it matters that human beings continue to exist. And the further point is that debating this inexorably involves one in the ethics of metaphysics.

The major reason, as far as I can see, for thinking it is important that there be a future is the worry that the present is meaningless. One way of expressing this worry is to worry that the values which could give – and in practice do give – our lives meaning are contingent, 'empty and illusory, parochial and conditional' (Heyd 1994, 211). As Heyd puts it, 'if life is a game in which ethics is the set of rules for success (just, prosperous, meaningful, good, valuable), what makes the game itself worthwhile?' (212). In order to think about this worry, therefore, we need to ask: is the game itself worthwhile? If we think it is, does this commit us to impersonalism? Or can the value of the game be justified from within the game?

I have my own suspicions about the theoretical possibilities here. But they are not important. What is important is that this is basically the question of the ethics of metaphysics in relation to agents. Asking 'should there be agents?' is essentially asking about the value of life, whether that be meaning or something else. Why? Because in order to think about whether there should be agents, we have to ask whether there is value in their existence, both individually and collectively, what sort of values these are, what is necessary for them to keep

existing, whether they ought to be protected at all costs, whether they can be overridden, etc. All kinds of answers are possible but their details do not matter here. The point is that such efforts are necessary. And the answers we give to these questions will determine whether we think there is a duty of justice or morality to currently living agents to ensure the continued existence of a human world.

The argument from the importance of the future is not, therefore, a way of grounding the assumptions of theories of intergenerational justice without reference to the ethics of metaphysics. It just *is* the ethics of metaphysics, and, to the extent the claims aren't well supported, it is bad ethics of metaphysics. Claims made about the importance of the continued existence of future agents, even when based on the importance of this to or for currently living agents, are particular views within the ethics of metaphysics, and choosing between them is a question for the ethics of metaphysics. It cannot be decided by reference to only considerations of justice.

9. Conclusion

The ethics of metaphysics is unavoidably fundamental to thinking about the intergenerational question in climate change. Theories of intergenerational justice make assumptions about what will exist in the future. I have argued that those assumptions need to be ethically justified, and I further argued that this justification cannot be carried out only on the basis of considerations of justice. Theories of intergenerational justice cannot ground duties to future agents to make particular assumptions come true. And in trying to ground a duty to current agents to make particular assumptions come true, they are actually doing the ethics of metaphysics.

Notes

1. This section is taken, sometimes adapted and sometimes directly, from Sanklecha (2016).
2. This paragraph follows formulations in Sanklecha (2016).
3. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to make this clear.
4. The ethics of metaphysics also includes questions about what the non-human future should consists of; for example, whether particular features of the natural world should be preserved for their own sake. The inclusion of such questions is one important thing that distinguishes it from what Heyd (1994) calls genethics. The full ethics of metaphysics is, I believe, a good way of systematically unifying all of the things we care about when it comes to the future. But I will not describe it in this paper, because here I focus on future generations.
5. The last three sentences are taken from Sanklecha (2016).
6. I owe this to Ed Page, Matt Matravers and Lukas Meyer. My thanks to them.
7. I thank Lukas Meyer for helping me see this specific interpretative possibility.

8. When we describe it like this, I think we see that this is a rather religious feeling. To be clear, I don't mean by this that it is religious in the sense of being dependent on belief in a particular religion (or any), or in the existence of God. What I mean is two things. First, there is a striking similarity between the structure of that feeling and the (contingently) religious idea of eschatology. It locates, at least in part but necessarily, the meaning of a life in a world inaccessible to that life. Second, it seems to me to be an expression of a human heed that, historically, has been expressed by and through religion. Positively, it may be described as the desire for the Absolute, an unmoved mover, an ultimate ground. Negatively, we can express it as the desire to escape what Kolakowski (2001) calls metaphysical horror.

Notes on contributor

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