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Utilitarianism and Future Generations

Ten years ago the World Commission on the Environment and Development defined the objectives of sustainable development. The objectives also include the interests of future generations. Since sustainable development is a concept composed of principles with partly controversial content, the main purpose of the paper is to appraise utilitarian attempts to talk about future generations instead of sustainable development. We decided to focus on utilitarianism, because we want to emphasize the essential role of economic thinking in environmental questions. Utilitarianism is a theory which forms the central starting-point for a great deal of economic thinking. It is also an interesting ethical theory within the context of future generations, because it defines the moral goodness of acts and principles in terms of their consequences. Aren't we connected with the future generations indirectly through the consequences of our acts and policies?

We begin with the question: why do future generations pose such a decisive challenge to present ethical theories? How can we have obligations to future people, to the unborn, about whom we scarcely know anything? Another challenge is how to avoid dictation of our own values to future generations, a certain kind of imperialism of the present analogous to cultural imperialism. The main task is to test the suitability of utilitarianism _ which is a form of consequentialism _ within the context of future generations. We do not deal with individual utilitarianism because of its inability to take care of the interests of future generations. We shall, instead, concentrate on collective utilitarianism. Collective utilitarianism offers a suitable basis for environmental problems, since it emphasizes the long term consequences of acts for oneself and others. Different forms of collective utilitarianism are discussed in relation to the following three problems that are related to the future: 1) our ignorance of the identity of future people, 2) the size of future generations and 3) the distribution of natural resources. We consider both subjective and objective forms, as well as average and total forms of utilitarianism.

When dealing with the problem of ignorance we shall point out that the subjective form of utilitarianism is unable to take into account future generations in a coherent manner. In order to anticipate future values one has to assume some sort of objective reference point. We claim that together with some liberal ideas objective utilitarianism offers environmental policy principles that avoid unfair imperialism of the present and correspond to general moral intuitions.

Collective utilitarianism produces appropriate principles of population policy, when population questions are considered as regional problems. Regional population study allows one to combine population principles of both average and total utilitarianism to secure a minimal standard of good life for everybody, permitting simultaneously the maximum population. To justify regional population policy one may need arguments of justice which exceed the limits of collective utilitarianism.

Since collective utilitarianism is committed to temporal universalism, future generations are an integral part of its ethical and political agenda. However, the long time scale of environmental policy and the large number of future people that follows from the temporal universalism make it difficult to find politically acceptable solutions to the problem of fair distribution of natural resources. One urgently needs the practical perspectives of other ethical theories in order to find politically and ethically sound solutions to environmental questions.