

BRIEFING 9

IN PURSUIT OF THE FUTURE

ESRC PROFESSORIAL FELLOWSHIP 2003-6 (RES051270049) The Research is concerned with the way the future is known, anticipated, planned for, secured and produced. It seeks to connect isolated fields of enquiry and works toward a comprehensive, socially relevant theory of the future.

PHILOSOPHY AND NON-RECIPROCAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR FUTURES

In Western legal traditions the key assumption behind the concept of legal responsibility is that the law applies to everyone equally, because all individuals, defined purely as legal persons, have the same responsibilities to each other under the law. Responsibility is a social relationship, but one defined by the moral rights that all individuals possess vis-à-vis one another. The basis of responsibility is therefore reciprocity, and the affirmation and defence of the rights of legal persons. But crucially, only living individuals can recognise each others' rights, and exercise their own. Future generations (potential persons) cannot, and so their ethical status is uncertain. Further, non-persons who are harmed by the actions of persons have no rights against them, by definition. In a context where the consequences of technologically-enhanced social activities reach out into the distant future and the natural world, such a concept of responsibility is inadequate to cope with the spatial and temporal interrelatedness that is revealed by the capacity of technology to produce long-lasting and far-reaching harm. Further, the standards by which agents can be held accountable for the results of their actions are inadequate. Where large-scale technological innovation is indispensable to social life, the capacity of science to predict the consequences of its own ingenuity, based on knowledge of the past, has proven limited. The concept of *post facto* limited liability represents a failure to come to terms with this difficulty that scientific prediction has in being a sufficient guide for action in the present.

Unacknowledged presuppositions

Understanding the assignment of responsibility as rooted in reciprocity and in science's ability to foresee the outcomes of action introduces into ethics and law a temporal bias in favour of the present. What matters ethically is taken to be the present interests and preferences of living human beings, despite the fact that the exercise of technologies in the present can do significant and unpredictable harm to future humans and to their ecology. Attempts to redress the balance using cost-benefit analysis to work out what obligations are owed by the present to the future fail, because their assumptions about value (e.g., the social discount rate) only reinforce this bias by assigning a different ethical standing to future generations solely on the basis of their temporal location. This definition of responsibility rests on a questionable understanding of human nature, one which interprets the role of time in our experience of the world reductively. It presents an individualistic concept of human being, defining ethical life as the defence of the fixed interests of all human

beings as individuals, interests which can be defined according to our present understanding and considered valid for all time. The goal of this ethics is effectively the preservation of the individual's isolation. If we understand human life differently, however, then this ethical stance, and its temporal bias, has to change.

The significance of relationships

Humans develop emotionally and cognitively through contact with other humans – first, their parents, then peer groups, and so on. Their understanding of themselves is therefore primarily relational, and provides a primary context of responsibility that defines it as *care* for these vital bonds, and for the developmental narratives they represent. To care for a relationship is to strive to understand what it needs in order to continue to thrive, and to respond appropriately. It calls upon the totality of our capacities for sensing and judging what kind of future can be traced as already underway in the present, and demands that we actively take responsibility for shaping this *living future* (see Briefing 7). We care about the health of our relationships with others because they provide us with emotional and cognitive satisfaction. We recognise therefore that they are of *constitutive value* to us, in that their continued development is a condition of the meaningfulness of our own lives. We cannot continue to flourish unless they do also. But this ethical perspective has consequences far beyond our intimate relationships with those to whom we are closest.

Responsibility rooted in care

The perspective of relational care reveals a need to universalise concern by expanding the circle of those things we care about. The plurality of human relationships whose futures are cared for demand certain conditions should be established in order to guarantee their development. In the present, for example, certain social and institutional arrangements are called for to support our web of concrete social bonds. But the survival of other things, such as a cultural institution, a tradition of scholarship, or a particular landscape, is of constitutive value to us also. We would feel diminished if we thought these things were about to disappear. Looking to the future, the primary dimension of our concern for the totality of these *constitutive goods*, we have to recognise that to protect it other conditions need to be put in place. These include general principles of action and institutions that can articulate them. Our embeddedness in a dense web of constitutive goods, and our power over the directions taken by their emerging futures, requires that our ethical stance to be one of non-reciprocal *guardianship* (in the parental sense) towards the future. What is owed to the future grows from the nature of being human, i.e., caring for the web of constitutive relationships we need to flourish. This obligation must take in all the conditions of the well-being of what we care about, including the natural ecologies that provide our ultimate support system. Above all, our ethical stance has to be defined by Hans Jonas' maxim that 'never must the existence or the essence of man as a whole be made a stake in the hazards of action'.¹ In this future-oriented context, just as the reciprocal recognition of rights has to be replaced with non-reciprocal responsibility, the idea that current scientific knowledge alone is a valid guide to action has to be replaced by an ethical and legal focus on precautionary action.

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 37.