

Philosophy Café
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I want to address three questions:

1. What is responsibility to the future?
2. Is it possible and what might be the barriers?
3. *Are* we and *should* we be responsible to future generations?

I will offer a social perspective on the subject and Chris will follow this up with philosophical arguments.

1. What is responsibility to the future?

We have to think about it analogous to responsibility for our actions in the present. To be responsible for our actions is part of what it is to be a human being that has achieved a certain level of maturity and is part of a community. To be responsible for our actions, therefore, is also an integral part of being a citizen. Only small children and severely handicapped persons are not held responsible for their actions

However, we are not just responsible for our actions but also for persons in our care and our possessions. That is to say, it covers our social positions as guardians, carers, and owners. Thus, for example, it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children attend school. If I own a tree that causes damage because it has not been maintained properly I am responsible for that damage. If I die before the tree, then the responsibility for the tree passes to the next owner.

From these examples we can extract some common principles. These shared principles of responsibility include that responsibility is bounded in time and space, that is tied to individuals (their actions and possessions), that does not extend beyond the life time of individuals, and that effects can be causally linked to specific actions/possessions.

What would it therefore mean to open up that notion of responsibility to the future? It would no longer be bounded in time and space. It would have to exceed the life time of individuals, thus can't be tied to the one individual and, depending on the length and complexity of the processes involved, effects could not (necessarily) be causally linked to specific actions. Responsibility to the future therefore means a break with the key criteria that currently underpin our understanding of responsibility. This, however, is more troublesome than it appears at first sight because that way of understanding responsibility reaches back to Greek antiquity. It thus has a very long history. To break with that tradition, therefore, means change at a very deep structural level of current social, political and legal arrangements.

This brings me to my second question

2. Is Responsibility to the future possible and what might be some of the barriers?

The first thing to note is that we constantly extend ourselves into the future, that everything we do has a future component: our daily actions, our plans and projects, and our commitments and duties.

The second thing to note is that we assume ownership over the future: First, we regard the future as ours to design, shape and mould. We activate this assumption daily when we plan and make decisions, when we use technology such as refrigerators, cars and internet banking and when we fly to our holiday destination and carry the shopping in plastic bags. Secondly, we consider the future as a legitimate territory for us to conquer: with inventions and promises, with wars and political interventions, and with economic measures such as insurance to counteract potential disasters. Thirdly, we utilise of the future as a domain of economic opportunity to be exploited: with mortgages and loans, with investments and bonds and when we engage in futures trading. In our traditional assumptions about responsibility ownership is inescapably tied to responsibility. This relation of responsibility does not change when we assume ownership or guardianship over the future.

Now let us briefly focus on some examples of actions together with their effects that do not fit the responsibility model of being: bounded in time and space, tied to individuals and individual life times, and causally connected to actions and/or ownership. Pertinent examples would be the invention, production and use of plastics, heat engines, and nuclear power. All three are socially distributed technologies that permeate the socio-environmental base of contemporary existence. This means, such technologies are produced and used not just by one individual but a multitude of people. Involvements with these technologies tend to be interdependent and networked across space and time. And the effects tend to reach not just the individuals involved but a much wider and broader base of recipients that includes animals, plants and even the inorganic world.

In their effects, these technologies transcend individuals' life time. They are not tied to individual ownership. They are unbounded in time and space. And they cannot be causally connected to individual actions and/or possessions. Importantly, those affected may not even be born yet and these (unborn) future recipients cannot hold us to account because they are without voice or vote. This means a) that the principles which currently underpin our understanding of responsibility do not work in such contexts, b) that our assumptions are not appropriate to the contemporary condition for action and c) that we can act with impunity because there is no one to hold us to account. It is, in other words, a setup for irresponsibility. But that, surely, is an unacceptable state of affairs.

This brings me to my final question:

3. *Are we and should we be responsible to future generations?*

My answer is yes on both counts and my argument is as follows:

1. The fact that there is a grave mismatch between our assumptions and the base principle that we are responsible for our actions does not mean that just because

we hold inappropriate assumptions we are not responsible to future generations for our actions.

2. The fact that we have not developed conceptual, legal and institutional arrangements to cover the contemporary context of action does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.
3. The fact that those affected cannot hold us to account does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.
4. The fact that effects are dispersed across time and space in an interdependent way, which makes causal analysis difficult, if not impossible, does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.
5. The fact that we do not have appropriate social, legal and institutional structures in place to hold us accountable, does not mean that we are therefore not responsible to future generations for our actions.

Thus I propose: *If the reach of our actions extends over thousands of years and thereby produces living conditions for many generations of descendents then our sphere of responsibility needs to extend accordingly so that it matches the reach of our actions.* It is my argument that this principle applies no matter how far into the future the effects of actions may extend, no matter how complex the effects are intermeshed, no matter how many others are implicated. And, if we do not have the appropriate social, legal and institutional structures in place to hold us accountable, then it is high time that these are developed.

Biographical Details

Barbara Adam, PhD, DScEcon, is Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. She has written extensively on the matter of social time and the future. Her publications on the subject include five research monographs and an equal number of edited books as well as over 100 articles. She is founder editor of the journal *Time & Society*.

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