

## Philosophy and Non-Reciprocal Responsibility for Futures

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### Abstract

In Western legal traditions the key assumption behind the concept of legal responsibility is of equality before the law, because all legal persons have the same responsibilities to each other under the law. Responsibility is a social relationship defined by the moral rights that all individuals possess vis-à-vis one another. The basis of responsibility is therefore reciprocity, and the defence of the rights of legal persons through practices that establish accountability for actions. Consequently, only living individuals can recognise each others' rights, and exercise their own. Future generations and non-humans cannot, and so their ethical status is uncertain. 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. The individualistic tradition of thinking of responsibility as reciprocal therefore contains a temporal bias towards the interests of the present. An alternative perspective is needed, one which understands the relation between present and future differently. The concept of responsibility as *care* provides an example. Humans develop emotionally and cognitively through contact with other humans – first, their parents, then peer groups, and so on. Their understanding of themselves is primarily relational rather than individualistic, and provides a context of responsibility that defines it as care for these vital bonds, and for the developmental narratives they represent. We recognise that they are of constitutive value to us, in that their continued development is a condition of the meaningfulness of our own lives. Looking to the future, the primary dimension of our concern for the totality of these constitutive goods, we have to recognise that to protect them certain conditions should be established. These include general principles of action and institutions that can articulate them. Primary among these principles is 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'.

### Biographical Details

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### Acknowledgement

The research has been conducted during a three-year research project 'In Pursuit of the Future', which is funded by the UK's Economic and Science Research Council (ESRC) under their Professorial Fellowship Scheme.

## 1. Introduction

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The question of the nature and limits of responsibility is inescapably central to any understanding of how we should live. Whatever answer is given to a question which begins 'but why should I...' has to fall back on the idea of obligation in order to present a justification of behaviour that is more than merely instrumental or grounded in self-interest – in short, an *ethical* justification.

Responsibility is a many-sided concept, however. Part of attaining adulthood in human societies is the recognition that one is responsible for one's own actions – that, in harming you, I could have acted otherwise, and so must acknowledge my culpability for what I have done. On the one hand, we are held responsible for our deeds after the fact when their negative consequences become known, and we then take responsibility by acknowledging the truth of the accusations presented to us. On the other hand, we also take responsibility actively before the event: we take the lead in work projects, care for the health and education of our children, instigate activist groups, and make promises to our friends. Actions have an ethical significance, and therefore impose certain obligations on those who act, because of others whose existence is ethically significant.

This capacity for affirming responsibility is reflected both in social institutions and in the conceptual and practical underpinnings of those institutions. The legal system, for instance, provides a public means of managing responsibility *post facto*. Nonetheless, the concept of responsibility that underlies its methods of management only partially reflects social knowledge of the multiple meanings of responsibility. This becomes a problem once it is juxtaposed with the fact that long-established concepts of responsibility are now being shown to be insufficient for dealing with the outcomes of collective human action. There has developed a mismatch between the capacity of industrialised societies to produce long-term consequences that affect future generations and our environment,<sup>1</sup> and their corresponding capacity both to comprehend the ethical significance of this technological power, and to develop institutional structures that would reflect this understanding.

The reason for the emergence of this mismatch, we shall argue, is the inability of current institutions to adequately incorporate the temporal and especially futural aspects of action and responsibility into their apparatus. This inability is rooted in their conceptual foundations, and particularly in their interpretation of responsibility. Drawing on a range of philosophical sources, we will argue that a reorientation of the concept of responsibility is necessary if this mismatch is to be rectified, and the conflict between current futures-creating practices and ethical intuitions resolved. To achieve this, we will suggest that the concept of responsibility is at bottom a conception of a mode of future-oriented subjectivity. Consequently, we need to rethink the basis of responsibility in terms of the structure of this subjectivity, leading to a conception of responsibility as fundamentally active and non-reciprocal, or in other words, responsibility as *care*.

## 2. The Concept of Responsibility: Reciprocity and Accountability

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Let us turn to the fundamental nature of the concept of responsibility first, before considering why it is problematic in the contemporary context, and then moving on to the issue of temporality. Consider the following ways in which responsibility for harm to others is legally understood. To legally assign responsibility, it is necessary that a causal role in harming can be imputed to an agent. For example, responsibility might be assigned on the basis of a direct causal connection between someone's actions and specific consequences, or alternatively, on whether or not they successfully perform their publicly designated function in a particular social context. If you see me assault someone in the street with whom I am arguing, you are justified in holding me

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Luigi Pellizzoni, "Responsibility and Environmental Governance," *Environmental Politics* 13, no. 3 (2004). p. 553; Barbara Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London: Routledge, 1998), ch. 5.

responsible for their injuries. Similarly, you would have been justified in holding a nearby police officer responsible for preventing the assault had one been present whilst the argument was escalating towards violence.<sup>2</sup> The causal role of the agent here is direct, in the sense that they are seen as the source of the harm, or as directly contributing to it by omission of action. Causal responsibility in this sense can be imputed to either individuals or organisations.

Alternatively, agents can be held responsible for certain outcomes of their actions further down the line, if it can be shown that they should have foreseen the risks of acting as they did, but did nothing to ensure public safety. For example, a manufacturer may be held legally liable for harm caused by a product once they can be shown not to have taken into account the risks posed by the harmful chemicals it contains. Liability for risk, like direct causal responsibility, can be imputed to both individuals and organisations.

In either case, for a legal judgement about responsibility to be possible presupposes that, firstly, the agent actually has a legal responsibility to behave in certain ways, and secondly, that the causal link between the agent and the harmful act can be established. So there must be something about agents that means they can be held legally responsible for their actions. There must also be in operation some standard of proof that allows for the possibility of a truthful connection between agent and harm to be established. Let us examine these key background philosophical assumptions, which underlie legality as such.

First among these assumptions are the conditions which mean an agent can and should be held responsible for their actions. The attribution of responsibility for harm to another presupposes that the agent is a moral agent and therefore is the ultimate source of the decision that led to the harm. But this is not enough on its own. Also necessary is the assumption that the fact that another agent (as opposed to an inanimate object) suffered harm is ethically significant. In the contemporary world, the most influential way of articulating this ethical significance of harm against agents is the public affirmation of the rights of individuals to equal recognition of their dignity or intrinsic worth, as in, for example, the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A right is an entitlement which, it is considered, must be fulfilled in order to secure and protect the intrinsic value of a moral agent. Rights can only be exercised or claimed by moral agents, and recognised by other moral agents. Consequently, the idea of equal rights can be interpreted as an attempt to make concrete what is involved in the concept of a social contract. I acknowledge my responsibility to protect your rights because you reciprocally acknowledge your responsibility for mine. This concept of the universally binding reciprocal recognition of rights forms the basis for the legal equality of individuals, and also establishes what is involved in the breaking of the contract when harm is done to another individual, namely, an infringement of the rights of that individual and a transgression against their intrinsic worth as a moral agent.

The second assumption underwrites the possibility of knowledge of causal linkages. The universal recognition of rights underwrites legal responsibility by establishing the meaning of the basic obligations that citizens of a legal order have to one another. To acknowledge another's rights is not something that can truly be done if it is only done subjectively. If someone holds another against their will and deprives them of food and water, they cannot absolve themselves of responsibility by simply thinking to themselves 'this person has, despite my starving them, intrinsic dignity'. Responsibility for recognition of rights is always public: it implies an assessment of the meaning of acts performed between two or more agents. Given that this is the case, then responsibility is unthinkable without accountability. Acting with regard for the rights of another means being prepared to give a true account of one's actions. Classical social contract theory is the basis on which the state establishes courts of law as means of publicly establishing the accountability of agents. A legal tribunal is a formal setting in which a true account of a series of events is established according to a set of norms and standards that meet with wider social agreement.

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<sup>2</sup> Pellizzoni, "Responsibility and Environmental Governance.", p. 547.

Although responsibility implies an internalisation of ethical and legal expectations, and therefore the production of a conscientious subject, it is nevertheless a fundamentally intersubjective relationship. Agents are not, in the first place, held responsible by some 'voice of conscience', but by the institutional framework that articulates what reciprocal recognition is to mean. We are held responsible by another subject to whom we must give an *account* of ourselves. In societies where the legal order receives its final legitimation from monotheistic religious belief, the legal tribunal is mirrored in the sphere of religion by the practice of confession, which makes accountability to another, and to God as the ultimate Other, the foundation of all ethical relationships.<sup>3</sup> In societies that explicitly or implicitly do without such a religious foundation, and instead operate with a concept of human dignity as the ethical basis of the legal order, one is accountable for one's actions to the ideal of human dignity as such. The tribunal then represents the social contract as such, demanding an account of why the contract to respect the rights of all was broken.

So responsibility is, on this account, a social relationship of equal and reciprocal recognition of rights, which requires, in order to operate, an established context in which the true story behind how an act occurred can be ascertained: it implies both *reciprocity* and *accountability*. This implies, however, a particular kind of context for the actions of moral agents, as Hans Jonas has pointed out.<sup>4</sup> This *milieu* has for most of human history been that of face-to-face encounters between individuals. The reach of human agency was constrained by various forms of limitation to a restricted spatio-temporal frame, within which chains of cause and effect, and with them, accountability, can be readily established. However, the capacity of humans to do harm has, for centuries, been technologically extending itself, and now reaches out far beyond social networks to humanity's relationship with the ecologies in which its living present is embedded, and towards the near and distant futures that are already latent and unfolding within this present. Further, implicit within this greater reach is uncertainty as to just what processes the consequences of actions in the present will intermesh with and what additional effects will result.

Once actions, due to their technologically-enhanced reach, have this threatening and unpredictable potential for harming both ecologies and the life-chances of future generations, it becomes difficult to understand the ethical and legal significance of these actions, due precisely to the assumptions of reciprocity and accountability on which our understanding of responsibility rests. Consider the following cases:

- 1) A company knowingly dumps large amounts of toxic waste in a highly-populated region, with full awareness that, once a critical concentration is reached over the course of three or four centuries, its future inhabitants would suffer from birth defects and degenerative diseases.
- 2) A company develops a new and highly effective chemical method of pest control which becomes the market leader. Early tests on the product indicated that it was safe when used in typical agricultural settings. But thirty years later, it is discovered that residues of the chemical have been building up in the bodies of animals and humans across the areas in which it is being used, and that the occurrence of certain birth defects and degenerative diseases has increased in the period since its widespread adoption.<sup>5</sup>

Both these situations create ethical problems for the concept of responsibility we are examining. Case 1 will probably resonate, at first glance, with a moral intuition that a deliberate wrong is being done. But to follow through on this intuition by arguing that the company is not fulfilling its responsibility to respect the rights of moral agents is problematic. This has to do with the very

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<sup>3</sup> Winston Davis, "Introduction: The Dimensions and Dilemmas of a Modern Virtue," in *Taking Responsibility: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Winston Davis (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 3-7.

<sup>5</sup> For an example of this long-term uncertainty concerning bioaccumulation, see Jana G. Koppe, and Jane Keys, "Pcbs and the Precautionary Principle," in *Late Lessons from Early Warnings: The Precautionary Principle 1896-2000*, ed. Poul Harremöes *et al.* (Copenhagen: European Environment Agency, 2001).

concept of a right itself. Part of the definition of a right is that it constitutes a justified entitlement that is claimed or exercised by someone capable of moral agency, or by someone else appointed by them for this purpose, and it is on this basis that it is interpreted as part of the terms of a social contract, and thus as the object of a reciprocal obligation.

The problem then is that members of future generations do not yet exist, and can therefore neither claim anything for themselves, nor appoint someone else to exercise or defend their rights for them.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, it is impossible for any who suffer harm but are not members of the 'community of moral agents', such as animals, plants and other natural elements of our wider ecology, to be taken into account once a social contract of reciprocity has been made the foundation of the legal order. Once the potentially disastrous consequences of present actions reach out beyond this 'community', this becomes more than just a problem with the coherence of a definition. The moral status of future generations itself, and thus the nature of our ethical relationship to them is in question, as well as our potential capacity for exploiting and polluting nature without limit.

The second example poses a different problem. In the first case, the act is done in full knowledge that there will be a direct causal connection between dumping waste and later harm. The company dumping the waste is therefore aware that, if the harm were to be of the sort that would affect those now living, they would be held accountable for it and would be guilty of failing in their responsibilities. In Case 2, however, the gap in the ethical framework has to do with a lack of knowledge about what consequences would emerge in the future, with the passage of time being the crucial variable that makes the difference between a harmless chemical and a harmful one. Here, there is also real damage done to future generations and also to the surrounding ecology. Compared with the first case, however, the damage might appear to be accidental, as no foreknowledge of likely effects exists. Legal liability for the effects of actions can typically be avoided if it can be shown that all possible measures for avoiding harm, based on then-current knowledge of the risks of action, had been taken. This means that if certain risks are not predicted at the time of acting, due to the state of scientific knowledge at the time, then the agent responsible for the act cannot be held responsible for the unforeseen effects.<sup>7</sup> However, it can be argued that the potential for such consequences is not one which is only adventitiously attached to particular uses of technology, but is a structural feature of modern technology itself, given its capacity for intentionally and unintentionally altering basic ecological processes. The complex interactions that technologies often enter into with biological and inorganic processes mean that uncertainty as to results has to be a basic assumption of scientific practice. In Case 2, responsibility cannot be assigned because of the specific role that knowledge plays in justifying action. Legally, when I give an account of my actions, I have to show that they were justified in terms of what I knew at the time. To demonstrate that their consequences could not have been predicted, I have recourse to the public standards that determine what is to count as true, which will be those established by contemporary scientific knowledge. On this basis, if I could not have used scientific advice to predict the specific consequences of my actions, then I cannot be held liable for them. The idea of accountability, as we have seen, assumes some shared concept of truth to establish the causal link between act and consequence. But when this concept of truth is centred on the scientific ideal of linear causal explanation that works from past to future, then in the context of technological innovation of which Jonas is speaking, the problem is that futures are being constructed by technologies of which the past knows nothing. Once this context exists, accountability loses its moorings.

So the inability of contemporary society to ethically comprehend the full consequences of its technological capacity has two roots. Firstly, a concept of responsibility which, being grounded in the reciprocal recognition of rights, is inappropriate for a society with this technological capacity, and secondly, a concept of accountability that relies on standards of truth that are also

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<sup>6</sup> Hillel Steiner, "The Rights of Future Generations," in *Energy and the Future*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Peter G. Brown, *Maryland Studies in Public Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), p. 154; MacLean, pp. 183-4.

<sup>7</sup> Pellizzoni, "Responsibility and Environmental Governance.," p. 552.

inappropriate in a context where the power to technologically create futures far outstrips the power to predict what the consequences of these will be. In both these cases, there needs to be a conceptual revolution in our thinking: a concept of responsibility is required that establishes an ethical relationship between the living present and those beyond the 'community' of rights-holders to whom, nevertheless, it is recognised that harm is being done. A new concept of accountability is also needed, one that is rooted in a shared concept of truth that sets out how agents must take responsibility for the effects of their long-term future-creating activities whilst they are still underway, setting new futures in motion. The connection between certain social conditions, certain habits of mind, and these concepts must be traced out in order to allow for the development of concepts better suited to contemporary conditions.

### *3. Responsibility and Short-Term Habits of Mind*

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The mismatch between the capacity for producing long-term consequences and their corresponding ability to comprehend the ethical significance of this technological power is manifested, as we have seen, as an inability to adequately understand the ethical relationship between past, present and future. Although social knowledge of responsibility might imply an intuition that there is indeed a wrong being committed in the two examples we examined above, the presence of a temporal and specifically futural dimension exposes the insufficiency of the conceptual framework.<sup>8</sup>

This failure can be attributed to the framework's selective temporal bias. Its model of responsibility, based on the requirements of accountability and reciprocity, defines the context of ethics in a way which makes the present count at the expense of the future. On the one hand, the idea that responsibility is a reciprocal relationship between possessors of rights, as we have seen, makes it impossible to understand how future human beings can be thought of as having had their rights impaired. On the other, the idea that accountability has to be ultimately anchored by the limits of scientific knowledge in the present can effectively exculpate agents whose actions mobilise new technologies with extended temporal reach.

In both cases, the understanding of a responsibility to the future is viewed from the standpoint of concepts which define ethical relationships solely from the point of view of a present in which the interests and entitlements of all relevant parties have already been decided. The difficulty of going beyond the limitations of this standpoint without a thorough critique of its presuppositions is demonstrated by the application of cost-benefit-analysis (CBA) methods by philosophers and economists to the problem of 'inter-generational equity'. Using CBA means assigning to an action, policy or product a set of financial estimates of the costs and benefits it will incur, in order to determine whether it is of net positive or negative value. The methods of allocating values reflect current accounting practices of 'future discounting' regarding the value of present versus future costs and benefits. In these practices, which are held to reflect social preferences, the value of £100 now is seen as greater than £100 in, say, ten years. This is true whether the £100 is a cost or a benefit. Consequently, I would much rather put off paying £100, but would much prefer to receive the same sum sooner rather than later. On these assumptions, if I possess a legal right to use a particular resource in the present, then to exercise my right now would realise more value for me than either putting off exercising it, or giving it up in favour of a future individual's right to use the same resource.<sup>9</sup>

If this practice of 'social discounting' is used to inform CBA analysis of action in the present, then it is evident that it is much easier for courses of action with a high probability of short term benefits and a high probability of long-term costs (including the ill-health of others, disease and resource deterioration) to be approved. The problem with this approach is that it does not really

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<sup>8</sup> The inability of traditional (consequentialist and deontological) perspectives on justice to cope with the paradoxes arising from its temporal aspect has been variously noted. See for example Peter Laslett, and James S. Fishkin, "Introduction: Processional Justice," in *Justice between Age Groups and Generations*, ed. Peter Laslett and James S. Fishkin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Jacobs, *The Green Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), pp. 68-70, 81-82.

weigh the legal rights of present individuals against the legal rights of future individuals. Instead, it estimates the future value of something to individuals in the future based on how valuable it is to them now, and uses this as a yardstick for assigning a 'future value' to it. What it does not (and cannot) do is to include within its calculations the actual future value of an entitlement to the person who will exercise it in the future. At a discount rate of 10%, a projected income of £1 million a hundred years from now is worth only £73 today, but it is worth £1 million to the individual who will earn it in the future.<sup>10</sup> Social discounting thus fails in its aim of giving ethical weight to the value of the future, as it illegitimately establishes a difference between the ethical standing of two individuals on the basis of their location in time.<sup>11</sup>

Further, CBA itself involves basic assumptions that work against the possibility of taking ethical account of the future. By assigning a financial value to the outcomes of an action, it homogenises the value of the object under consideration. This could be a policy, a resource, an entitlement like the right of the people in Case 1 to avoid ill-health, or the continuing existence of an unpolluted lake or some other environmental feature. To assign value in this way is to place all goods on a single scale, one that ranks them solely in terms of their instrumental value in relation to the preferences and interests of those living now. It assumes that the realisation of value is primarily 'chrematistic', i.e., is a matter of accumulating and consuming material goods, a process which only fulfils material demands of survival in the present.<sup>12</sup> Goods can be of value in various ways, however. Rights-based ethical theories define bearers of rights as possessing *intrinsic* value, i.e. value based on their unique properties, such as the ability to reason. As we shall see, we can also talk of the *constitutive* value that a good has for us, as when the existence of something is a necessary condition of something else being of value. In the case of constitutive value, the commensurability of different goods cannot be assumed: in fact, a condition of something offering us constitutive value is that it is actually incommensurable in any real sense with other goods, in the sense that their comparative values are not reducible to a common measure of value-in-general (such as a monetary one).<sup>13</sup>

What is needed is a conception of responsibility that, unlike the reciprocity-led model, explicitly recognises its temporal dimension in a way that does not, unlike CBA, understand futures merely as the x-axis on the graph of our present practices of chrematistic accumulation. Another way to understand this might be to think of it as an ethics of sustainability: how to recognise and articulate our responsibility to ensure the existence of futures. This ethics has to be one based on a concept of non-reciprocal responsibility, given the inherent inequalities involved in our relationship with the future. The relationship between living humans and future humans, and indeed between humans and their ecology, cannot be considered to be one of reciprocity between presumptive equals, but is instead one of non-reciprocity between the relatively powerful and the utterly powerless.

As we shall see, this conception can draw on various models, such as Jonas' example of parental relationships, and Deleuze and Guattari's description of artisanal creativity. What these examples reveal is that responsibility for the future must recognise explicitly that theory and practice construct the future by intervening in processes that are always already underway in the living present. To take responsibility for the future is therefore unthinkable without acknowledging one's participation in its creation – of which taking responsibility is itself a constitutive part. Responsibility in this sense is therefore unthinkable unless it is understood as an active commitment to be responsible for something before the event. In this sense, we shall argue, responsibility for the futures of coming generations and their ecology is unthinkable except in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 69. See also John O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 52-3.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Parfit, "Energy Policy and the Further Future: The Social Discount Rate," in *Energy and the Future*, ed. Douglas MacLean and Peter G. Brown, *Maryland Studies in Public Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), pp. 31, 37.

<sup>12</sup> O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics*, pp. 169, 180.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp.104-5.

terms of *care*, a concept to which contemporary writers on sustainability have alluded.<sup>14</sup> A care-based ethic has features which distinguish it firmly from one rooted in the idea of universal reciprocity (henceforth, the reciprocity-rights model).

#### 4. Non-Reciprocal Responsibility: Care and Connectedness

To understand how we can develop a conception of responsibility as care and a new concept of accountability to accompany it, we need to further interrogate the assumptions behind the rights-reciprocity view, in order to outline the implicit understanding of human subjectivity, and particularly of our experience of time, that underlies it. As we shall see, this view requires a highly individualistic and reductive understanding of human subjectivity and of time.

Let us begin by looking at how humans can be understood as 'future-oriented' beings, by returning to the mother watching her daughter building a tower of plastic building bricks. There are two ways of experiencing the world here, as we have seen, constituted by the different ways the woman and the girl live forward into their futures. But both experience their futures as the central, constitutive element in how their respective worlds *matter* to them. In other words, the world is significant for them because they can sense, imagine and shape its futurity. In Heidegger's sense, their existence is *ecstatic*, always out beyond their present, and it is only because it *is* ecstatic in this sense that their living present exists for them at all. It is this role of futurity, its constitutive significance for experience, and its connection with the way we *care* about 'what happens', which we must further explore in order to understand exactly how it is bound up with responsibility. Heidegger argues that responsibility is one of the ways we experience living a life that is constituted of 'projects', narrative constructions that extend themselves into the future and in doing so change the present.<sup>15</sup> Our experience of the world in the present is therefore formed through the practices by which we reach out towards its future. The projects constituted through these practices belong to us: their significance rests on our position in and viewpoint on the world. We therefore have a sense of being *called* to accompany them to their conclusion, and are therefore impelled to take responsibility for them. We are also aware that the possibility of them being concluded is set against the possibility that they shall not be, due to our own mortality.

But this perspective, as it stands, is insufficient to understand how responsibility for futures is exercised and can be extended. For example, the mother's sense of responsibility for her daughter implies more than the abstract, ontological responsibility which Heidegger has in mind. Heidegger describes *Dasein* as existentially responsible for itself, but the existence from which this responsibility arises is one of an individual consciousness reaching out into a future bounded by the possibility of death. In other words, Heidegger's account of what it means to be human, and therefore of what it means to be responsible, presupposes a particular understanding of the essential structure of human existence. To be always 'beyond oneself' in Heidegger's view means that human beings always interpret the present and past in terms of their own projects. But this implies that they experience themselves as fundamentally individual entities that are separated, like self-sufficient atomic units, from the rest of the human and non-human world. Meaning, it is alleged, arises in the last instance from our own efforts to give significance to the world around us, and to authentically take responsibility for our lives requires that we acknowledge this.

Such a view seems compatible with, and even complementary to, the interpretation of responsibility we have been dealing with so far. To understand responsibility as reciprocity, and therefore as a web of morally and legally-secured obligations to other living individuals, requires that we accord moral significance to individuals above all, as it is only individuals who can be bearers of rights. The broader sense of responsibility for futures outlined by Heidegger proposes that it is only individuals who can take responsibility for their fundamental project, i.e. giving meaning to their own lives. Heidegger thus gives us, as a complement to the view of

<sup>14</sup> See for example Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 200-1.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 327-335.

responsibility as reciprocity and accountability, a phenomenological account of how an isolated human consciousness, a single 'point of view' on the world, might experience an active sense of responsibility as a way of participating in a living future.

Among the most important presuppositions of these moral and phenomenological views of responsibility is that our relationships with other human beings are secondary to our immediate understanding of ourselves. Our relationships with others *come after* and *depend upon* some more basic kind of self-knowledge or self-experience. Consequently, in order to take up a properly ethical perspective, or indeed, a proper existential perspective human beings must abstract away from their particular concerns and attachments with the world and others, and view the situation from a 'higher' position above these entanglements, one in which the most fundamental aspect of being human (being an individual bearer of rights; authentic being-towards-death) is revealed. This higher position is one in which the universal or transcendental essence of human being, and with it our basic, immutable interests, become known or experienced.

If we consider the girl and her mother, however, we can see immediately that this interpretation of what it is to be human is problematic. Watching her daughter at play, the mother's understanding of her own past, present and future takes its impetus from and finds its horizon within the parent-child relationship. Her understanding of her own possibilities is circumscribed by her acknowledgement of a fundamental responsibility she bears for her daughter's possibilities. She does not experience this responsibility as a mere particular or accidental entanglement that can be abstracted away in order to reach down to what is really ethically and existentially important in her life. Rather, she experiences it as a necessary constitutive condition of the continued meaningfulness of her life: without her daughter, she would not be the individual that she is. Social knowledge of responsibility thus comprises at least two varieties. Firstly, the ethical beliefs and legal practices which enshrine the universal and equal rights of individuals, and which enjoin me to recognise your rights at the same time as you are enjoined to respect mine. Secondly, the ethical beliefs and practices which articulate for us our sense of commitment to specific individuals. Such a sense of commitment is, by definition, not universal; nor does it imply equality or reciprocity – the little girl would not be said to have a moral or legal responsibility to care for her mother in the same way. Further, a parent's non-reciprocal responsibility for their child derives from the specificity of their relationship. This particular responsibility is not extendable to the rest of humanity: the mother feels her responsibility to care for her daughter, but does not feel that this responsibility in its specificity extends to her neighbour or to a stranger, and nor does a stranger have a parental responsibility for the little girl. There is always the potential for a clash between the two varieties of social responsibility, given that the ethical weight of specific relationships can impose demands on individuals that directly conflict with the existence of equal and reciprocal rights. As Carol Gilligan has argued with respect to the experiences of young American adults, the two varieties of responsibility can be shown to be complexly interwoven within everyday ethical perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

Let us now consider what the basis of this second form of responsibility might be. The idea of responsibility as a reciprocal recognition, as we have seen, is typically justified with reference to the equal and inherent dignity of human beings. This dignity derives from the human capacity for moral agency, from the ability to decree for oneself a rule of conduct and follow it out of free will.<sup>17</sup> The justification of and motivation for reciprocal responsibility is therefore cognitive: it stems from rationally-derived knowledge of certain features of being human, and therefore demands of us that we act in accordance with this knowledge. If we consider the nature of the arena in which this view imagines action as taking place, then the emphasis is, as Jonas argued, on the temporal and spatial proximity of agent and patient, act and consequence: this act I will now perform must

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<sup>16</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 31 ff.

<sup>17</sup> The classic philosophical formulation of this position is Kant's. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 40-1.

be done with your present interests and rights as a living person in mind. The meaning of the act derives from a judgement *here* and *now* as to its rightness or wrongness.

Parental responsibility, however, has a different temporal structure, one that can be compared with what Heidegger refers to as 'care', but which has a focus other than 'my projects'. Care in this sense is not care for a future possibility of mine, and nor is it care for another fundamentally isolated individual. Instead, it is care for a relationship that links two individuals by sustaining and augmenting their own understanding of themselves. The mother, watching her daughter's development, desires that her daughter's future, which she feels straining to be born from within the scene played out in front of her, be nurtured and allowed to flourish. Bound up with this desire is the recognition that it is her relationship with her daughter that must sustain this living future. She feels a renewed sense of her own capabilities following close upon this recognition, a new extension of her freedom to act called forth by her commitment to do what her daughter's future demands of her. The world which she experiences is significant for her row because everything it comprises has meaning for the health of this crucial relationship, and for the futures that are being nourished by it in the living present she shares with her daughter. Care, in Heidegger's phrase, is the 'totality of being -in-the-world'.<sup>18</sup> It is the mode of our being, the affective, emotional and cognitive concern for emergent potentiality through which the meaning of things is revealed to us. But it is not, in the first place, caring for ourselves, but caring for our relationships with others. Developmentally and existentially, we only discover ourselves through our relationships with others, relationships which weave the dense webs of meaning that give our lives weight and texture, and which we strive to sustain in the face of conflict as we grow older.<sup>19</sup> In contrast with the individualistic view of moral status, which understands it as deriving from the *intrinsic* value of humans as moral agents, this understanding of care presents relationships as having their own moral status, given that they have *constitutive value* for us. They act as a matrix for the developing narratives of our lives, giving rise to the conflicts, breakdowns, negotiations and reconciliations that educate us about what is at stake in a life that is lived with and amongst other human beings. To understand oneself from this perspective is therefore to see oneself as inextricably linked to others, rather than as being essentially separated from them. It is also to understand these relationships as demanding of us that we take responsibility for their health and maintenance. The non-reciprocal responsibility of the mother for her daughter is of this kind. It is non-reciprocal in the first place because of the nature of the relationship between mother and child. But it is also non-reciprocal at a deeper level. The mother feels her responsibility for securing her daughter's development. But in fulfilling this responsibility, she is caring primarily for the relationship that exists between them, ensuring that it continues, develops and flourishes. At bottom, the non-reciprocal obligation she takes on is for protecting and developing a relationship about which she cares.

Having distinguished the presuppositions behind the two conceptions of responsibility we have identified, we might consider how these conceptions are related, and whether one is more fundamental than the other. One way of understanding this is to think about the way one might be seen as developing into its opposite. Heidegger provides a narrative of this kind when he describes the existential task of becoming authentically responsible for one's own destiny as a retreat from the concerns of the 'everyday' towards a confrontation with one's 'being-towards-death'. Becoming authentic is a process by which the individual separates herself from the thick network of relationships into which she is thrown, and discovers her own innermost being in the process. With respect to the question of moral self-knowledge, developmental psychology's traditional concerns have mirrored the structure of this narrative, depicting moral development as a process by which the individual progressively becomes more and more capable of abstract moral judgement. Moral maturity consists in a condition of autonomy, in which a person is able to determine for themselves which moral principles should be applied in any particular case. The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's research presents narrative of ethical maturation in which the child moves from a position of emotional dependence, in which her particular connections with

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.182.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), esp. chapter 7.

others are of primary importance, to a position of cognitive independence in which she is able to understand that the difference between right and wrong actions lies solely in their conformity to a principle.<sup>20</sup>

Kohlberg thus gives us a developmental hierarchy of moral perspectives, which places rational principles such as fairness and equality above the imperative to care for particular relationships. Indeed, the idea that ethical life must revolve around the maintenance of our particular relationships with others appears, on this view, to be a pre-moral perspective, both in terms of its view of the essence of moral action, and in its conception of moral motivation. Kohlberg's onetime colleague Carol Gilligan has however criticised his theory of development for uncritically reflecting what she sees as a one-sided evaluation of the meaning of ethics. She argues that what Kohlberg's developmental taxonomy of moral viewpoints describes is in fact a particular strategy for dealing with the risks and dangers involved in caring for relationships.<sup>21</sup> Understanding what is right as being decided by an abstract principle implies that, when weighed in the balance of ethical judgement, an individual's particular relationships with others are of next to no account. Given an ethically troubling scenario, any given individual could be substituted into it without this having serious consequences for the outcome. What would decide the rightness or wrongness of an act would be the degree to which it conforms to the demands of the principle of equal treatment, and to the concomitant requirement to respect the rights of others. What this means, however, is that specific relationships, once weighed against principles, are seen as replaceable and substitutable. They are not seen as themselves having ethical status. Gilligan suggests that, given the prevalence of this kind of approach to ethical issues amongst boys in Kohlberg's studies, it reflects primarily a particular crystallisation over time of patterns of response to crises within relationships. If differences between responses from boys and girls to the same ethical problems are taken into account, it is possible to construct a counter-narrative to Kohlberg's, which demonstrates that the ideal of autonomy is a rationalisation of a discovery that emotional intimacy can be dangerous. Adolescent boys in studies carried out by Gilligan and Kohlberg identified with the goal of achieving autonomy in terms that show a simultaneous identification with an ideal of separation.<sup>22</sup> Boys most commonly identify with the dominant socio-legal definition of the moral status of individuals as a zone of protection in which their intrinsic rights are established. For them, responsibility is then the kind of responsibility that is represented by the socio-legal definition, a reciprocal limitation of the freedom of moral agents, undertaken in the interests of protecting everybody's rights here in the present. Moral judgement is understood as akin to mathematical reasoning, arriving algorithmically at a single best solution to a moral problem that settles it once and for all.

The overwhelmingly positive evaluation of individual autonomy was not shared by girls in the same studies. On the contrary, the desire for autonomy, which leads to identification with abstract moral ideals such as fairness and equality, was tempered by the concern that too much emphasis on principle risked blinding the individual to the particular context of her actions. This context is always one in which the individual agent finds herself bound to specific concrete others by relationships with individual histories and future potentials. To act within this context is seen as an ongoing project of tending and forming, one which extends existing narratives towards emerging futures. This is done by managing and negotiating conflicts that arise through the intersection of needs, projects and interpretations of the situation between interrelated individuals. What is required in any particular situation of conflict is a matter of experience, practical judgement, and empathic identification with others. In each instance, the relevant relationships are treated as *sui generis*, as irreplaceable. The importance, meaning and thus the ethical status of each is a product of its history as experienced by the individual. Moral action in this context requires identification with the network of relationships itself, and demands that agents take responsibility for what happens to the relationships with which they are concerned. Gilligan's

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1 & 2 (London: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, pp. 39-41

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

evaluation of Kohlberg's studies has clear parallels with the patterns of response to experiences of moral crisis of men and women incarcerated in Nazi and Soviet concentration camps, as described for example by Tzvetan Todorov. Men tended to separate from each other, striving to maintain a sense of dignity in the face of their sudden vulnerability to brutality and humiliation,<sup>23</sup> whereas the women found countless small, everyday practical ways of caring for each other. Todorov observes that 'on the whole, women survived the camps better than men did, not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of psychological well-being'.<sup>24</sup>

Once the developmental story has been turned around, as in Gilligan's account, then the meaning of responsibility necessarily appears in an entirely different light. The demands of care are entirely non-reciprocal, and arise from the necessity of preserving the substance of ethical life itself: someone who has to deal with a conflict between two friends who have fallen out over a lie responds in the first place to what their common relationship needs, and questions of right and wrong are then settled and solutions worked out in this primary context. Being responsible is not a matter of respecting the rigid boundaries that are supposed to exist between individuals; instead, it is all about extending one's sphere of action rather than curtailing it, about developing the capacity to sense and respond to what others are counting on us to do.<sup>25</sup> In this light, viewing one's responsibilities as fundamentally defined by the need to preserve the rights of others represents a particular strategy to adopt when the kind of ethical action demanded by care is not possible. In a populous, complex, highly differentiated society, the pressures to develop an institutional normative framework that can manage social relationships between groups of strangers mesh with the psychological pressure to adopt such a framework that can arise from an individual's own development.

The reciprocity-rights view thus arguably represents a partial understanding of social responsibility that arises under specific conditions, and as a result reflects certain presuppositions, particularly about the temporality of ethical life, and about the role of the future in particular. As we saw in section 3 above, chief amongst these assumptions is the short-term temporal arena of moral action. An individualistic understanding of responsibility works with consequences that affect the agent and those other existing persons amongst whom she lives. Her rights help define her interests in the present, and the future is of interest insofar as it affects these interests. The context in which she and others interpret these rights is one with invariant features; she possesses these interests and rights as a function of her essential humanity, and respect for her fixed entitlements is required by this same fundamental feature of her identity. Just as the adoption of the rights-reciprocity perspective abstracts away from the rich context of care that defines the everyday contours of ethical life, it also abstracts away from the kind of temporality that is implied by this perspective, resulting in a definition of the future as subordinate to the invariant interests of the present.

The working-out of how best, in the prevailing circumstances, to make action conform to the requirements of a set of abstract, invariant conditions requires refinements and specialisations of reasoning of the kind that Gilligan describes as being practised by the boys in Kohlberg's studies. Care, however, as Heidegger describes it, is an existential 'totality' for the individual. For Heidegger it is a way of relating to one's projects that involves every human capacity, not just reason. In the context of Gilligan's notion of care, we can expand this totality to include the complete set of capabilities with which we relate to others: reason, empathy, imagination, sense-perception, and so on. Next to this, the specialisation required by the rights-reciprocity model appears as nothing less than a reduction of our ethical sensitivity and potency, a reduction that proceeds by distilling from the temporality involved in care a theoretical and practical 'metaphysics of the present'. For this perspective, the sole test of ethical reasoning is how

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<sup>23</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner & Abigail Pollack (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996), pp. 77-8. See also Todorov's distinction between the 'heroic' and 'ordinary' virtues, pp 10-20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 38.

closely an action in the shifting conditions of the here and now conforms to a timeless standard deduced as valid for any action anywhere.

The kind of temporal perspective that caring demands is one that flows from the futures we envisage. But this is not a future in which what we envisage is simply the fulfilment of our pre-given interests and the redemption of our entitlements. To illustrate the difference between these two temporalities as one between two ways of relating to the future of what one cares about, let us consider Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the perspectives of the architect and artisan. Whereas an architect sees the difference between present and future as one between a moment containing an abstract blueprint alongside an unformed matter, and one containing a realised form that is the fulfilment of this first moment, the artisan understands this distinction as one between two temporal modalities of what can be perceived in the present. A present reality, such as a block of wood to be carved, contains within it actual structures, but also virtual tendencies that map out spaces in which its futures are already potentially contained and to which the intervention of the artisan will introduce unforeseen inflections, bringing forth a new structure. Futures are already inherent in the actualised forms of the present like the potential contained within the torsions that have determined the directions of growth of the block's fibres. Only through the exertion of her full aesthetic sensitivity and practical skill can the artisan successfully accompany the virtual potential of the wood to its emergence into actuality.<sup>26</sup> The wood already anticipates its own futures, and it is the role of the artisan to co-anticipate these in combining the forces she employs with those already expressed in the traits of the material. The wood's future is a living future in which the artisan participates by being actively co-responsible for it.

This stance of the artisan towards her material is one of non-reciprocal responsibility, and indeed, care. It is her ability to maintain a complete sensuous connection with its significant traits, and what they portend, throughout the duration of her work that enables her to create. Learning to carve wood has been an apprenticeship in how to be *responsible* to the material, and to maintain a certain affective relationship with it, continually adjusting and balancing input and feedback in the production of one actual future from within the available virtual space of potential futures. The attitude of care for human relationships that Gilligan describes has the same orientation and utilises a similar mode of attention. Sensitivity for what a particular relationship demands of us in a given situation is also a practical skill that exercises many different abilities to anticipate and shape potential futures. Only here we are co-anticipating with other individuals the work of affective, emotional and other forces, and what significance the impact of these forces will have for the structure that binds us together. The mother's concern for her daughter is defined by such processes: the immediacy of concern she feels for her is defined by an embracing sensitivity that seeks to understand the potential significance of everything her daughter does. Her success in building the tower of bricks makes her mother think of other possibilities: where might her developing skills of building and shaping lead? What would be the best way to build the girl's confidence? Should she buy a clay modelling set for her? What might the future be that is already emerging and what must be done to set it free? In this way, the carer exemplifies the future-orientation of the artisanal perspective even more than the artisan does. Whereas the purpose of artisanship is the creation of a work and so, at some stage, the interruption of a process of becoming, the purpose of caring for a relationship is to sustain and to enhance a process of becoming.

To sum up, care is not a special form of intellectual moral knowledge achieved through the distillation of the essence of human nature. It does not derive from a cognitive position secured at a privileged distance from everyday human entanglements, but, like the knowledge of the artisan, comes from practical immersion in activity. In this way, it is an example of what Aristotle calls 'practical wisdom' or *phronesis*, a mode of knowledge that he ranks alongside reflective, theoretical reason. As a form of responsibility, it is not an objective reciprocal legal relationship that obtains between moral agents considered as subjects of a law and therefore as signatories to a social contract. Instead, as is suggested by the example of the camp inmates described by

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<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), pp. 36-7; Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), p. 380-2.

Todorov, it is the substantive basis of any social contract itself and the means by which it is practically exercised. Care is a totality of identification – cognitive, affective, imaginative, and aesthetic – with the significance and satisfactions of a relationship. As such, it exhibits the temporal structure described by Heidegger, which makes it a practically exercised concern for the future of a relationship, i.e. for what it may become and for what it is already becoming. Like Heideggerean care (*Sorge*), it makes the present appear to us by tracing the portents, the virtual tendencies, which persist within its tangled lineaments, and by non-reciprocally *taking* responsibility for the anticipations of the future that it performs.

##### 5. Care, Constitutive Value and Universality

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So far, we have concentrated on *how* care operates, in order to separate the relationship-based model of responsibility it gives us from the individualistic one provided by the reciprocity-rights viewpoint. The idea of care is a concept of the substantive basis of ethical life as structured by a qualitatively different way of experiencing time, one which directly incorporates a living future into ethical deliberation and action. What we need to do now is to explore how this concept of responsibility leads us to concrete ethical conclusions about our responsibility for the future.

One seeming advantage of the reciprocity-rights model is the objectivity it appeals to, and the normative force it derives from this: a human being possesses rights vis-à-vis other humans simply by virtue of being a particular kind of thing, i.e. a human being. The web of reciprocal responsibility binding humans together can at least comprise all living humans (as we have seen, there are problems including future generations in this web), and its refusal to exclude any *particular* human beings can therefore be seen as a virtue. Compared to this, the non-reciprocal responsibilities that grow out of our care for others are limited, particular and seem to exclude humans with whom we have no pre-existing bond; their normative significance seems limited by comparison. This seems even more the case when we think of the problems on which the reciprocity-rights model founders, namely, its failure to give any coherent account of our responsibility to future generations, and its failure to deal with wrongs done to non-humans. How can we *care for* people who do not exist, when care seems to be based on an aesthetic, emotional and cognitive sensitivity to the thickness of our bonds with concrete others? How is it possible for care, given that its locus seems exclusively to be human relationships, to be the basis for taking responsibility for ecological harm? We might also ask a further question: even if the idea of a care ethic is coherent, would there be any role in it for a standard of public and legal accountability, or would its only purpose be to merely exhort individuals to be 'more caring'?

In fact, the normative significance of a futures-oriented concept of responsibility as care lies in what it tells us about how caring is a specific kind of *valuing*, and why this form of valuing is ethically pivotal. Any ethical basis for action rests on an estimation of worth of some kind, which establishes why we *should* act to achieve particular goals. The reciprocity-rights view implies a scale of values, one which considers the sole basis of ethical conduct to be respect for human dignity. The value of human beings is held to be intrinsic, i.e. to derive from what they are and what they can do, such as the ability to be able to follow rules which they decree for themselves, or to be able to use reason to determine their purposes. This concept of intrinsic value, as we have seen, marks off a zone of protection for moral agents, by locating that which is most valuable within the individual herself. This makes the source of value into a static property or properties which must be preserved through whatever changes the individual undergoes. The means by which the dignity of the individual is preserved is the acknowledgement and enforcement of certain entitlements or rights. As we have argued, supported by Gilligan and Todorov's analyses, however, this evaluation and the beliefs about subjectivity that support it can be interpreted as a response to particular psychological and sociological conditions that bases itself on a reductive model of subjectivity. Instead of being a universally true assessment of the foundation of ethical action, it appears then as a merely contingently useful strategy that works from within a straitened understanding of the relationships between humans and their world. Nonetheless, once conditions that give rise to new ethical problems pertain, such as the question of harms done to future generations, then the usefulness of this strategy evaporates, and a new, more comprehensive one is demanded.

Let us consider what kind of valuing is involved in care. This has two key features that distinguish it: firstly, the *irreducible plurality* of values that it implies, and secondly, its *temporal structure*, of which reaching beyond the present is an essential part. Taken together, as we shall see, these aspects mean that the part played by care in human experience has an internal impetus to it that demands a continual widening of its scope and reach, both into the future and beyond the limits of any given human community, and indeed the community of humans as such.

When someone is cared about, then they are valued because of a sense of being essentially bound to them. This bond is not a static one outside time, but is a living one that exists in a time that combines and interweaves a shared past and a future in which both parties are always already participating. As with the mother and the little girl, the bond of care is a narrative that evolves between people, growing out of a shared pleasure in the interactions that comprise the relationship, and a shared belief in its significance for their lives: a cared-about relationship always has a future. Care is therefore inseparable from the contribution of *meaningfulness* that a relationship makes: it is a condition of having a sense of who we have been, who we are and who we are becoming and might become. In this way, care expresses the way in which we find others *constitutively* valuable. In other words, care demonstrates that we find the existence of particular, concrete others to be a constitutive condition of the meaningfulness of our own lives. We feel that the flourishing of these others is inseparable from our own happiness and well-being.<sup>27</sup> From a perspective that sees human beings as caring subjects, what humans value most are those relationships with people (and things) that they feel to be constitutively valuable. As these unique relationships provide the conditions in which the individual can experience their life as meaningful, their constitutive value lies primarily in the contribution they make to the weaving of her identity.

Further, they can only make this contribution precisely because each is a unique relationship. Part of what it is to care for someone is to care for them as *this* individual, with a specific biography and a singular living future. Such a relationship cannot be transformed into an object of exchange without doing violence to its nature as a relationship. A break-up with a lover, followed by a relationship with a new one, is not a transition that can be reduced to an act of exchange, but must instead be described in terms of a narrative of loss and transformation. If relationships are not exchangeable in this way, then we cannot talk of them as things that serve our *general* interests. Caring relationships are not sought because they are means to an end in the way that food is a means of assuaging hunger. Interests, and indeed identities (which are bound up with an understanding of interests), are *revealed* in caring about others. Heidegger, despite his individualistic bias, was broadly correct to note that care is the primary way human beings make sense of their place in the world. Care is, however, more than Heidegger took it to be: it is the active connectedness of human beings, and thereby the primary means by which they learn what matters to them.

Care, then, comprises an irreducible plurality of relationships. In other words, what one relationship contributes cannot simply be substituted for by the significance of another.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, this plurality does not just comprise relationships between concrete human beings or indeed just relationships between human beings as such. Although, as part of their development, individuals learn about the place of care in their lives primarily through discovering their essential relatedness to other individuals, they also learn to recognise the constitutive value of, and their essential relatedness to, things and activities as well. Among the plurality of constitutively good features of their lives, they might count specific friendships, love relationships, community and political associations, creative work, various forms of respect, recognition of achievements, and leisure pursuits. Crucially, they come to learn that none of these valued features can continue to exist without their work, their active participation, their taking responsibility for what these things are becoming and might become. They recognise that what they value has its own future in

<sup>27</sup> O'Neill, *Ecology, Policy and Politics*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

which they are implicated through the very fact that they recognise it exists and their desire that it should be allowed to unfold.

Caring, as concern for the future of something, is therefore not simply a concern for the *preservation* of what is cared about: the future that is desired is not a static one but a *living* future, one in which that which is cared about continues to develop and to flourish. The mother's love for her daughter implies that she cares about the girl's life for its own sake. If I play in a football team in my leisure time and enjoy football as an essential part of what makes my life meaningful, then I may want the team to succeed, but I will also presumably want football to be a pastime that is sustained and promoted beyond the level of my participation in it, as a way of maximising the possibility of others finding the same kind of enjoyment in it that I do.

Considered together, these two aspects of care – the plurality of things cared about, and the desire that they have a living future, i.e. that they continue to thrive on their own account – can shed light on the normative force of care by demonstrating how, although remaining rooted in them, it necessarily reaches out beyond particular human relationships in the here and now. To care for something or someone, as we have seen, implies the capacity to respond practically to what one anticipates the caring relationship will demand. What actually is required may be a wide variety of things. For instance, to care for a particular, very highly valued friendship might require a sacrifice of time on my part, a capacity to listen, and a commitment to work for reconciliation between my friend and others. Perhaps the activities we engage in together and which largely define our relationship have a political component, and in changing social conditions I might feel impelled to ensure that the society my friend and I inhabit is the kind of place where our friendship can flourish. In such circumstances, I might take action such as campaigning for a right of freedom of association to be included in the constitution, and so on.

What care requires is the recognition that, in order to actively take responsibility for the future of what is cared for, it is often necessary to expand the range of one's concern, in the process coming to realise that other, more distant things and people are also of constitutive value, given their relationship to the proximate objects of concern. As individuals come to be aware of the expanding circle of objects into which the things and people they value weave them, they are forced to acknowledge that taking responsibility has to be a social endeavour. It will require of them that they form new relationships with others in order to be responsive to the demands their own concerns place on them.

If responsibility, once conceived of as care, manifests this tendency to reach out further into the living future of our current relationships, and into the social environment that sustains them, it also contains within itself an imperative to reach out still further in time, and beyond the social. The concern of individuals for what is of constitutive value to them places them, as John O'Neill has argued, in a temporal context which is often alien to contemporary perspectives, given the prevalence of habits of mind that focus energies on what instrumental value the near future might have for the present.<sup>29</sup> If responsibility, as care, is fundamentally an involvement with the living future of the present, then the nature of futures is of equally fundamental concern. This is because the future is not abstract, but is rather the future of the things that matter to us. It is where our care for them will be continued, fulfilled, or allowed to vanish along with its legacy. In this realisation, the question 'what has posterity ever done for me?' finds its answer: the objective and continuing existence of the things that matter to us requires that we provide for their endurance as values. For instance, if we are scientists who feel that the achievements of quantum physics are valuable in this sense, then we should take responsibility for ensuring that future generations can appreciate them, and so add to and/or criticise them as they see fit. We then see ourselves not just as hemmed in within the strait gate of the present between the abysses of past and future, but as the inheritors of a living past that finds the futures of our ancestors continuing to unfold through us, and the guardians of burgeoning futures that are

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-43.

already underway within the web of relationships that sustains us.<sup>30</sup> In this role, we need to be *guardians of cultures* who provide for the possibility of their continued flourishing.

But to be guardians of cultures means to be guardians of much more besides. It is true that among the plurality of things that matter, there will be extra-social things too: a landscape, a species of wild flower, the survival of whales or lions. And these concerns will demand an active response, by taking responsibility for what is cared about, and as a consequence, the circle of concern will expand further. But this still more expansive circle of concern ultimately implies an ecological frame of thought. When we recognise the dependence of the social or natural objects of our concern on other, hitherto overlooked factors, we are, through our care for their futures, recognising the interconnectedness of these things. Once we also acknowledge that care inevitably places us in the temporal context of which O'Neill writes, then we see that this interconnectedness is not just valid for the here and now, or futures near at hand, but stretches into distant futures also. Responsibility, understood as care, requires that we be concerned about the most general conditions that make possible the persistence of a living future for the things we care about. And finally, it leads to the conclusion that what care most demands is actually to take responsibility for the future of responsibility itself. From the individual level of Todorov's camp inmates facing the brutalities of their guards, to the level of the survival of the human race in the face of the unpredictable consequences of large-scale technological intervention in its ecology, what matters most out of all the things that matter is that the capacity to care be protected and allowed to thrive. In this way, care is more than simply a particular concern for the specific relationships that constitute an immediate milieu in which individuals live: it necessitates the affirmation of a universal principle such as Hans Jonas's injunction that 'never must the existence or the essence of man as a whole be made a stake in the hazards of action',<sup>31</sup> as much as it requires the artisanal skill of *phronesis*.

## 6. Conclusion

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The problem with the reciprocity-rights model of responsibility is, we have argued, fundamentally temporal. It excludes from ethical consideration both future generations and the ecological basis of our and their lives, by focusing on a narrow definition of ethical status. Further, it bases its conception of accountability on the idea that responsible action can only be taken on the basis of knowledge of the past, with science as the highest systematised form of this knowledge. Scientific prediction, however, given the complexity and temporal reach of the processes in which human action now habitually intervenes, is losing its place as the epistemological basis of responsibility.

The idea of reciprocal responsibility implies the idea that I, like any other moral agent, have the *power*, (or rather the passive capacity, which I can either exercise or not), to wrong you because I can ignore your rights. The concept of care, as non-reciprocal responsibility, implies that I can do wrong because I have the power to participate in, and thereby transform, your future in ways that count for or against your well-being and flourishing. This power is active, not passive, and cannot simply be turned on and off; it increases with the closeness of relationship between us if we are contemporaries, but it also increases if you 'belong' to the future, i.e. are a potential individual. Because we are always actively involved with creating the conditions under which the things which matter to us will thrive or perish, we are actively involved also with creating the conditions under which our successors will thrive or perish. In this regard, as Jonas writes, our exorbitant and ceaselessly exercised power to transform or destroy the prospects for our descendants' well-being requires that we actively take responsibility in proportion to this power.<sup>32</sup> As possessors of such power, we effectively have the status of guardians (in the parental sense) with respect to the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-4.

<sup>31</sup> Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

futures of what we are involved with, an existential role which we cannot abdicate or deny as it is inseparable from our constitution as human beings.

The shared standards of truth that determine for what exercises of our power over the future we should be held accountable can therefore only be determined on the basis of what we take the future to demand from us, e.g. what is necessary to ensure the survival of what is of fundamental constitutive value to us, and what is necessary to ensure that future generations can also exercise their care for their futures in the same way. The precautionary principle represents an important example of a candidate for such a shared standard, albeit one whose status remains that of a guiding criterion for public policy, rather than having any legal standing. Debates over intergenerational equity and the implications for our understanding of our relationship with nature begin from the wrong place, namely, the perceived need to establish what the *rights* of future generations and non-humans must be. Our ethical relationship, in either case, is established by care, which illuminates for us what we perceive as making possible flourishing and meaningful lives.

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