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Nicholas Rescher

Institutions: University of Pittsburgh

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DISTANT POSTERITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL GLANCE ALONG TIME'S CORRIDOR

NICHOLAS RESCHER

I

ONE OF THE SUBJECT-DEFINITIVE AIMS of philosophy is to facilitate an understanding of our human condition in the world's scheme of things. This calls for a concern not only for what is, but also for what is not—or, at any rate, not yet. And in this regard deliberations regarding our eventual posterity are bound to raise difficult and troublesome questions throughout the entire range of philosophical concern, alike in metaphysics, in the theory of knowledge, in ethics, in philosophical anthropology, and elsewhere.¹

One problem with the future is that there is an awful lot of it. We can contemplate next week, or next year, or the year 10,000—or an astronomical-scale future such as the world of the year 10 trillion. Contemplating so vast a range is bound to be challenging.

For pretty well any particular concrete thing x that we can name, identify, or indicate—ranging from ourselves, our earth, our solar system, our galaxy, and perhaps even our universe, there is a value of n to complete the statement “We cannot be reasonably sure that x will continue to exist and still be there n years hence.” And not only does such uncertainty prevail throughout the range of nonexistent objects, but comparable problems pertain to particulars at large.

When t is a time in the past, the phrase “the situation at time t ” has a definite referent, its detail fixed and permanent. However, when t lies in the future, this phrase has a wide spectrum of possible referents,

* Correspondence to: 1035 Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh, 4200 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.

¹ Some terminological elucidation is in order. The following vocabulary will be adopted here: *descendants*: children and children of descendants; *antecedents*: parents and parents of antecedents; *posterity (successors)*: descendants of living people; *anteriority (predecessors)*: antecedents of living people; *kinfolk*: one's blood relatives, past, present, future; *family*: one's relatives as defined by legal, social, or cultural convention (in some cases one's tribe); *familial posterity*: descendants of living family members; *familial anteriority*: antecedents of living family members.

projecting a manifold of diverse and discordant alternatives. Ideas like “our personal posterity at t ” and “humanity’s descendency at t ” are caught up in a proliferation of possibilities, because there are not (and, at any rate, not yet) any identifiable members of such groupings. As far as we are concerned, the idea of our posterity confronts us with speculative possibilities rather than specifically well-defined items.

In every matter of concern, be it demographic or economic or meteorological, our ability to predict matters of detail deteriorates markedly as we look more deeply to the future. We cannot ever be sure about the individuals we are dealing with. Think of a putatively identifying expression such as “the oldest person living in New York City in the year 3000.” Will the city even still exist by then—or will it have been annihilated by tidal storms or by a nuclear holocaust? Will it still be fit for human habilitation? Or what if there are several candidates for “oldest inhabitant?” Our putatively identifying expressions may fail to identify.

The projection of the present generation into the next admits of easy overview. Even now the transit of generations unfolds interactively about us. But as one follows this process further along and looks to children of children of children, matters become increasingly clouded in a speculative obscurity that eventually leaves little point in distinguishing between descendency and posterity. For in both cases there is no way of identifying individuals, confronting us with a mass of humanity whose involvement with us and the things we know, do, and value is as distant on the one side (blood relationships) as it is on the other (genealogical disconnection). Of course, spirit kinship is something else again: kindred spirits are as readily encountered on the one side as on the other.

What is one to say about the status of things (and people) that do not yet exist—and indeed possibly never may? For aught we can know to the contrary, with assured confidence our attempts to identify future particulars are almost uniformly mistaken. In the year 2500 there will doubtless be people living in Paris, but we cannot securely identify any one of them.

Philosophers have long been intrigued by this issue of what are called “contingent futurities,” with thought on the matter going back to Aristotle’s discussion of “the sea battle tomorrow” in his tract *On Interpretation*. As thought carries us further and further into the future,

our cognitive access to particulars fades away in an increasingly deep fog of unknowing. We can identify family members to deal with next year, but we have little information of our descendancy of three generations hence. And as to our posterity of ten generations hence, we can only make wild conjectures. The personnel of the distant future is an impenetrable mystery to us.

The principal point for present purposes is that such problematic possibilities—like the even more extreme *mere* possibilities, imaginative fictions we know never to exist (such as winged horses or gold mountains)—can nevertheless be objects of supposition, thought, and deliberation. They can figure in our imaginings, our plots, and our plans, and that status—tenuous though it is—suffices for them to be objects of interest and concern for us. Even as we can be frightened by mere figments of our imagination, so we can be preoccupied with and concerned about them. A merely imagined ghost or monster can have every bit as much impact upon us as the real thing would. So there can be no question but that those mere “contingent futurities” can exert as powerful an influence on our present thought as their eventual realization itself might.

In discussing futurity, it will be convenient to adopt the descriptive terminology outlined in Display 1. In the main, the present discussion will (as its title indicates) focus on our posterity in the distant future—the period a goodly number of generations hence. Let us count as a generation the elapsed time between the average age of parents when their first child is born—presently some 30 years (with the mother 25 and the father 35). This means that we will have roughly three generations per century. And we may assume that it takes some 300 generations for evolution to effect a significant change in the sort of hominid at issue. On this basis we can limit the horizon of concern to the distant (but not remote) future. For all manageable intents and purposes, the region of the very remote lies beyond our cognitive horizons. We had best focus on what is characteristically distant (rather than “remote” in our here specified sense).² It should be clear that the difficulties of information access that such a discussion faces will become all the more extensive and troublesome as one moves further

² The ontology of nonexistent objects is addressed in my *Imagining Irrationality: A Study of Unreal Possibilities* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), which provides an extensive bibliography of the subject.

out along time's corridor. Over eons we must expect evolutionary processes to do their innovative work. That homo sapiens will still exist as such and occupy this planet in the very remote (let alone the astronomically distant) future is a dubious proposition. In the very short range—the immediate future—prediction is reasonably practicable, for it is a safe prediction that things will stay much the same because it takes time to bring about significant changes. In the very long range—the astronomical future—all bets are off, thanks to the prospect of extinction.

Display 1

POSTERITY'S CHRONOLOGICAL TIMEFRAME

<i>Stages of humanoid futurity</i>	<i>Fururity level (order of magnitude in 10 years)</i>	<i>Future temporality (in years)</i>
immediate	1	up to 10
near	2	on up to 100 (over decades)
distant	3	on up to 1,000 (over centuries)
remote	4	on up to 10,000 (over millennia)
very remote	5–6	on up to 1,000,000 (over aeons)
astronomical	7+	huge!

NOTE: The historical reversal of this time scale is instructive. Level 7+ goes back to the evolution of primates, level 6 to the earliest prehumans, level 5 to the species *homo*, and level 4 to the origination of agriculture, with the onset of recorded history soon to come.

There is no question but that futurity presents difficulties in philosophy. For how can ethical, social, and political philosophy possibly take future people into account when we neither individually, qualitatively, nor quantitatively have any reliable information about them?

For many philosophical purposes, however, there is fortunately not much one needs to know about the specifics of our posterity. Most of the salient philosophical issues regarding our posterity can entirely bypass the issue of its actual composition and to some extent even the issue of its actual existence. For many of the salient issues can be addressed at the hypothetical level via such questions as: If there were descendants of ours in the year 5000 would they

- deserve considerations in our present plans?
- merit our now making sacrifices on their behalf?
- be a fitting subject of obligation on our part?
- believe as we do regarding the inhumanities of Nazi Germany?
- judge ethical (economic, political) matters by the same standards as ourselves?
- be likely to be pleased by (of approve of) our doing various things?

One may well begin this series with affirmative responses, but this inclination would seem to become increasingly diminished as one moves down the list.

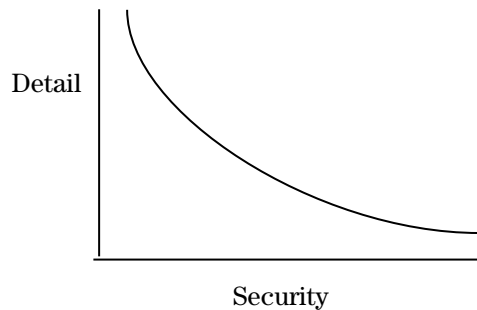
The philosophy of history in its grand scale is yet another point of contact between the issue of future generations and that of world chronology. If the Hegelian tradition of world progress holds good, future generations will live under vastly more favorable utopian conditions. If the Nietzschean doctrine of world-stabilizing eternal recurrence holds good, the life history of future generations will substantially repeat the circumstances and conditions of the past. But in both cases, the matter becomes extremely speculative. The awkward fact is that it is virtually impossible to achieve credible predictive detail with respect to our distant posterity. After all, we ourselves can bear witness that even a single generation—our own—can bring drastic and unforeseeable change in such portentous matters as global warming, increases in human longevity, mass migration from the Near East, and opiate drug crises in advanced societies.

II

Predictive Basics. Fundamental to any sensible discussion of the matter is the detail/security relationship (Display 2).

Display 2

THE DETAIL/SECURITY RELATIONSHIP



Consider the following series of claims:

- In the year 3000 there will exist 4,785,976 humans in Mozambique.
- In the year 3000 there will exist more than 3 million humans in Mozambique.
- In the year 3000 there will be many human individuals in Mozambique.
- In the year 3000 there will be vertebrates in Mozambique.
- In the year 3000 there will be organisms in Africa.

Clearly it is easier to make a safe prediction the vaguer we become about it.

On this basis we have to reason with the fundamental epistemological relationship set out in Display 2. Accordingly, in deliberating about the future we need to specify how much detail and how much security we are asking for. In dealing with future populations, for example, we may consider the number of people on 1 July 2075, *on Long Island to the nearest dozen*, or *in the area of New York City to*

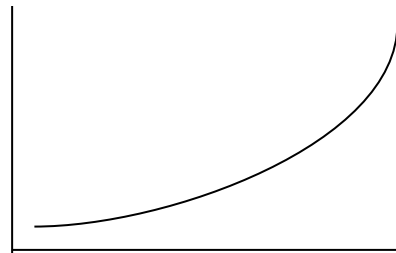
the nearest 10,000. Definitiveness clearly makes a big difference for what we can reasonably claim.

Display 3

COGNITIVE CONTROL OF FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

(The Range of What Might Then Be for Aught We Now Know)

Volume of future possibilities [at a given level of detail] that we cannot securely exclude on the basis of present knowledge [at a given level of security]



Futurity

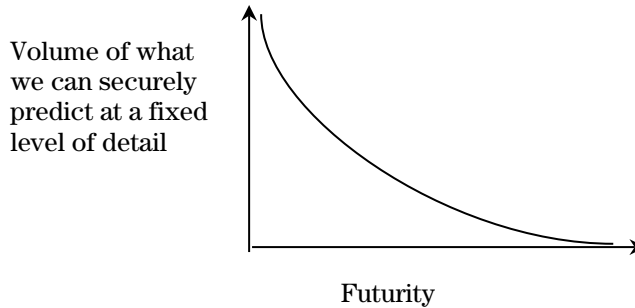
Our capacity to eliminate possibilities—to rule out what cannot then possibly be the case for aught we now know to the contrary—declines markedly over time. The resulting epistemic situation is depicted in Displays 3 and 4.

As these predictive basics indicate, Yogi Berra had it right: “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.” Our human future is veiled in obscurity. We have no clue about whom we will be dealing with as regards our own descendency four or five generations hence. Few and far between are those of whom one can say, as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, that they are “not of an age but for all time.” And in the long run we are uninformed not only as to *whom* we are dealing with but even *what* we are dealing with as regards the types of humanoids at issue. For in the course of many generations evolution is bound to do its transformative work, and what sorts of beings will then emerge is not open to informed foresight but a matter of speculative guesswork. The remote future is a topic about which we know precious little.

Display 4

COGNITIVE CONTROL OF FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

(The Range of Secure Predictability)



This is not an occasion for enlarging the range of speculation about the human future. There is no shortage of literature on the topic. G. W. Wells's *The Time Machine* was an important landmark here. But the ball had already been rolling for a long time if one can count utopian works such as Plato's *Republic* or Thomas More's *Utopia* as moving in this direction, or indeed Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, which envisioned the emergent dictatorship of enlightened proletarian man. Idealistic speculations such as G. B. Shaw's "Back to Methuselah" or Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* also qualify as instructive contributions to speculations about mankind's future—as does a good deal of science fiction. The present discussion makes no attempt to expand this mass of conjecture about human societies, but merely endeavors to indicate and clarify the range of issues that the contemplation our posterity puts on the philosophical agenda.

Henry Clay's declaration that "[t]he constitution of the United States was made not merely for the generation that then existed, but for posterity" hit the nail on the head.³ As regards long-term success in the realization of our projects, the cultivation of our values, and the appreciation of our efforts, we have no alternative but to entrust matters to our posterity; in this context they are the only game in town. It is therefore strongly in our interests to inform and motivate them, and doing what we can in this direction is very much to our benefit.

³ Speech in the U.S. Senate, 29 January 1850.

In many ways the law is designed to tie the hands of posterity through the generality of its strictures. When it prohibits polygamy, for example, it does so not just for us but for our grandchildren. When it mandates a decennial census, it binds the agents and activities of the future. But laws can be changed or abrogated, and uncertainty always casts its shadow over their own future. The abolition of entail, the prohibition of perpetuities, and various measures to curtail the influences of a “dead hand” have all tended to make the future less amenable to present control. And so, despite various efforts to regulate and control of human affairs, how our posterity will comport itself remains obscured in a fog of uncertainty.

So what, if anything, can a philosopher reasonably say on the subject? To achieve confidence in the matter, one can address the issues only on a purely conceptual basis. “If I have great-grandchildren, they will have to be offspring of my grandchildren.” If certainty is required, then this sort of near-tautology is pretty well the best we can do. Our remote progeny are bound to be one vast mystery for us. Not only can we say almost nothing about what they will be like, we cannot even say for sure whether they will be there. Our view of them will have to be hypothetical, speculative, and conjectural. We cannot even identify them: They will certainly have an identity, but there is little or nothing specific that we can say about it.

III

Ontology: Descendancy and Posterity. The most basic metaphysical issue relating to our posterity beyond ten generations hence relates to the issue of identity and identification. When talking of our successors of the year 2500, we simply do not know who is at issue. Nor can we claim on any basis other than the most speculative what can be said about them at the level of generic description. What they are like physically, how they think cognitively, how they manage their affairs politically, what engages them personally—the whole array of crucial facts about them—are for us matters shrouded in the fog of unknowing. They are for us neither identifiable nor discernable. Our only access to information about them proceeds via pure speculation. As far as we are concerned, they are not identifiable individuals but mere possibilities.

In looking to the humans of the future, we are not dealing with known quantities but with conjectural possibilities. Thus consider such prospectively identifying descriptions as:

- my eldest grandson's (age 14) grandson
- the 100th president of the U.S.
- the mayor of London in the year 3010

Such individuals are neither fictional ("merely possible") nor actual ("definitively extant") but speculative ("realistically possible"). We cannot say whether they will exist or not; their existence is contingent and may or may not come to be. With future people we really do not know with whom we are dealing. And so, the dictum "to be is to be identifiable" is problematic here because they are certainly not identifiable by us or indeed by any living being. What they admit of in the here-and-now is description and not identification.

To be sure, we can sometimes be virtually certain of their existence, such as "the oldest living Chinese person in 2500." But even then there is virtually nothing further to be said about them. Are they male or female, tall or short, sleek or fat? There is no way of knowing. Alike, their existential and their descriptive condition is a puzzle for us.

The conditions that will prevail in the life setting of our distant posterity are for us unfathomable—a mystery. Will they live in a utopian Eden-on-earth where our own fondest wishes for them are more than realized? Or will they live in deepest misery in a setting compared to which Dante's *Inferno* is a South-Sea paradise? Who can possibly tell? While we can study the past, we can only speculate about the future. The world of the distant future lies substantially beyond our ken. All we can reasonably surmise is that for them the conditions of life will be very different from what they are for us.

IV

Communication and Control. The question of our dealings in relation to distant posterity cannot be described as pressing or urgent. After all, what's the rush? By hypothesis their impact will be felt only in the very distant future, so there does not seem to be any great need to

hurry. But no matter how distant the destination, our journey there has to begin now.

Our relationship to our eventual posterity is unavoidably complicated by problems of communication. After all, we have no prospect of interaction with our remote posterity, and short of that unrealizable dream of traveling in time, they cannot communicate with us. Nor are our efforts to communicate with them (for example, via time capsules) likely to be understood. For all practical purposes we live in separate worlds. For while we can certainly attempt to give them messages, whether they will receive them is one problem, and how they will accept them yet another, seeing that their concerns, interests, and values are likely to be very different from everything we could envision. Insofar as Egypt's pharaonic tombs carried messages for the ages, it is clear that we have not received them in the spirit in which they were intended.

As any parent soon comes to recognize, control over our posterity is very limited. And even merely *cognitive* control—information—is a problematic issue. We humans do not have a good track record when it comes to predicting the course of human affairs.

The transiency of things already lamented by the Greek poet Simonides and reflected in the all-destructive “tooth of time” (*tempus edax rerum*) of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a fact of life with which we must all come to terms. As we look at the world about us, we cannot but acknowledge that all of it will change. But while we cannot but acknowledge *that* this is so, we know very little about the *how* of it.

There is a significant information asymmetry between the past and the future. We know for sure that four generations ago we had $2^4 = 16$ ancestral great-great-grandparents. But the size of our own posterity five generations hence is bound to be shrouded in mystery. If there are always three children, each of whom has three children, there will be $3^4 = 81$ people in that posterity cohort; but if our great-grandchildren all remain childless, there will be none. Even the size, let alone the composition, of our descendency is a highly problematic issue.

Abortion, reproductive restriction (such as Communist China's “one child” policy), and the sort of gender selection practiced in the Indian subcontinent could certainly influence the biostatistics of the next generations. And sociopolitical arrangements are more difficult to manipulate transgenerationally. (The jury is still out regarding North

Korea's endeavors in this direction.) And the abandonment of fashion can sweep matters of thought, creativity, and culture. How subsequent generations will manage their lives in large measure lies unfathomably beyond our knowledge and control, and perhaps even beyond our wildest imaginings.

Once present for *any* reason—chance, choice, uncertainty, chaos, and the like—unpredictability always has ramifications over a far wider domain. For the world's processes constitute a fabric of cause-and-effect interconnections within which all those unpredictable occurrences themselves proliferate further causal consequences that are thereby also bound to be unpredictable. This circumstance vastly diffuses the unpredictability at issue with choice, chance, and their cogenerators. So once unpredictability gains *any* foothold at all, it can spread like wildfire throughout the environing domain of cause-and-effect relationships. For want of a horseshoe nail, an entire kingdom may be lost. Small accidents can produce great effects that, for this very reason, can prove to be unpredictable.

Moreover, the volume of reliable predictive information about matters of detail in any field, be it meteorology or population or economics, diminishes over time: the more distant the future, the less detail we can confidently claim to know about it. With increasing futurity our analogies weaken, our extrapolations fade and collapse, our conjectures erode. Broad generalities remain in place, but the volume of reliable detail is increasingly diminished.

And so, as we contemplate the situation of our posterity over the increasingly distant future, we come to realize that there is very little we can confidently say about their knowledge, their values, and their life-situations, and indeed even about their scientific understanding of the physical universe that we share with time.⁴

V

The Problem of Future Knowledge. But is it not an important factor of commonality that we and our distant posterity inhabit that same

⁴ The larger situation regarding to our knowledge regarding the future is discussed in my *Predicting the Future: An Introduction to the Theory of Forecasting* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), which provides extensive bibliographical information on the subject.

world subject to the same laws of nature? Well, yes and no. We certainly do inhabit the same physical universe subject to the same laws of nature. However, how they think about those laws of nature and even what they take them to be is changeable and therefore problematic for us. And when we shift the environmental perspective from the physical world to the social or political or economic world, our uncertainty regarding those eventual arrangements is all the more drastic. Despite our sharing the physical universe in common, there is no reason to think that our remote posterity and we think about things in similar terms.

When our scientific successors of later generations will investigate the same nature we ourselves do, the sameness of the object of contemplation will do nothing to guarantee the sameness of the ideas about it. It is all too familiar a fact that even where human (and thus homogeneous) observers are at issue, different constructions are often placed upon “the same” occurrences. Primitive peoples thought the sun to be a god, and the most sophisticated among the ancient peoples thought it a large mass of fire. We think of it as a large thermonuclear reactor, and heaven only knows how our successors will think of it in the year 3000. As the course of human history clearly shows, there need be little uniformity in the conceptions held about one selfsame object by differently situated groups of thinkers.

Since science is always the result of inquiry into some sector of nature, it is inevitably a matter of a transaction or interaction, in which nature is but one party and the inquiring beings another. The result of such an interaction depends crucially on the contribution from both sides, from nature and from the intelligences that interact with it. A kind of chemistry is at issue, so to speak, where nature provides only one input and the inquirers themselves provide another—one that can dramatically affect the outcome in such a way that we cannot disentangle the respective contributions of the two parties, nature and the inquirer.

Each inquiring civilization must be thought of as producing its own cognitive product, all more or less adequate in their own ways, but with little if any actual overlap in conceptual content across civilizations. Human organisms are essentially similar, but there is not much similarity between the medicine of the ancient Hindus and that of the ancient Greeks. There is every reason to think that the natural science of different astronomically remote civilizations should be highly

diversified. Even as different creatures can have a vast variety of lifestyles for adjustment within one selfsame physical environment like this earth, so too they can have a vast variety of thought-styles for cognitive adjustment within one selfsame world.

After all, throughout the earlier stages of man's intellectual history, different human civilizations have developed their understanding of nature in a substantially different way, and the speculative shift to an extraterrestrial perspective is bound to amplify such cultural differences. Perhaps reluctantly, we must face the fact that on a cosmic scale the so-called hard physical sciences have something of the same cultural relativity to which we are accustomed with the material of the softer social sciences.

The fact is that all such factors as capacities, requirements, interests, and course of development affect the shape and substance of the science and technology of any particular place and time. Unless we narrow our intellectual horizons in a parochial way, we must be prepared to recognize the great likelihood that the science and technology of a later civilization will be something very different from science and technology as we now know it. We are led to view that our human sort of natural science may well be *sui generis*, adjusted to and coordinate with a being of our physical constitution, inserted into the orbit of the world's processes and history in our sort of way. It seems that in science, as in other areas of human endeavor, we are situated within the thought-world that our technological and social and intellectual heritage affords us. The posture of future generations is entirely hidden from our view.

VI

Sociological Futurology. Anthropology standardly deals with the condition of human cultures—generally those whose extant sites and artifacts we can visit through travel. Unfortunately, the cultures of the future—our own posterity included—are not comparably observable, because time-travel is not available to us, save in imagination. Relating those future cultures to ourselves is deeply problematic because neither physically nor cognitively do we have any way to get there from here. Things will be different; *autres temps, autres moeurs*, as the Greek

proverb better known in this French version has it. And yet it is just in these different circumstances of which we know virtually nothing that our distant posterity is going to live.

We identify ourselves in contrastive groupings—culturally, racially, socioeconomically, educationally. And we are drawn to the idea that our familial posterity should maintain our own group identifications; ideally, we would want them to be much like ourselves in these regards. But we also realize full well that, the world being what it is, this type homogeneity is unstable over the long term, and that some generations down the road our posterity may have little type uniformity with ourselves save for DNA. Accordingly, predictive uniformities and laws are problematic matters in human history. Granted, there are no zombies in mankind's cultural arrangements—societal conditions do not come back from the dead: once slavery is abolished, that is the end of it; once corner grocery stores have expired, they are gone for good. But insofar as tenable, such generalizations are of negative bearing: they exclude possibilities but do not tell us what will happen. How our distant posterity will manage its domestic, commercial, and cultural affairs is a mystery to us. Within the whole range of human enterprise, religion is perhaps the most stable and enduring. To all visible appearances, it is safe to bet that the present world's major religions will still exist in clearly recognizable forms for fifty generations hence. And what has historically defined them will still be there: Israelites will exclaim that “the Lord thy God is one”; Christians will pray to “Our Father, who art in Heaven”; Muslims will chant, “There is no God but Allah,” and exclaim that “God is great”; Buddhists will continue to seek the path to *moksha*.

All the same there is, in the end, very little we can say that goes beyond the rudimentary essentials of providing for people's needs (food, shelter, clothing, and belief) and for the transgenerational transmission of life, technology, knowledge, and spirituality. We know *that* such requirements must be met, although *how* this will be accomplished is pretty much beyond our ken.

VII

Ethical Issues: Our Concern for Them. As with humans in general, our posterity falls within the orbit of our dutiful obligations. In accepting the idea of “doing unto others . . .” we have to include among those others also those who are yet to come. A big problem looms before us at this point. We cannot ever be securely confident that we know what our distant posterity is like as a biological organism, and even less can we be confident about the beliefs, values, goals, and aspirations that will come to obtain at that juncture. We cannot have any warranted assurance that whatever program we deem ourselves to have seen in matters of science, scholarship, or morals will be permanent and that the human achievements in thought that we prize will in times to come enjoy the respect and esteem we think them to deserve. Why, then, should we be concerned, caring, and supportive regarding those eventual successors of ours? What obligates us to our posterity? We know them not, nor can we establish any sort of interactive relationship with them. So why care for them at all?

What significance can posthumous developments have for us? Why not “live for the moment”—eat, drink, and be merry, and let the future look after itself? What responsibility have we toward our posterity? After all, think of Joseph Addison’s complaint that “we are always doing something for Posterity; I would fain see Posterity do something for us.”⁵

Perhaps we should adopt an attitude of total indifference toward what happens more than 100 (or 1000 or 10,000) years hence. Perhaps those temporally remote successors should be viewed as planetary aliens in point of discounted remoteness, and we should therefore view long-term global warming or radiological pollution with detached indifference. But it seems is difficult to bring ourselves to take this line.

Yet any sort of contractualism is impracticable here, as any sort of reciprocation involves the challenging difficulty of thinking ourselves into remote futurity. The linkage becomes so thin that it becomes difficult to bring the familiar factors of contractuality or reciprocity to bear. Only a theological approach (“We are all God’s children”) or an idealistic one (“You should be a Mensch about it and see others in your own image”) seems to have the necessary traction.

⁵ *The Spectator* (20 August 1714).

We should do this because we ultimately have no real choice in the matter. If our values have any future at all—and this is admittedly uncertain—then it will have to be realized through our posterity. It is a matter of *faute de mieux*—of this-or-nothing. With regard to the survival of value, all of our eggs are in this one basket; if we do not rely on our posterity, we have nowhere else to turn.

And then, too, there is the ethics of the matter. Morality demands that we should care for one another's interests. It does not really specify much about those others—their gender, their race, their birth data are all put aside. We have as little real excuse for writing off our chronologically distant successors as we do for writing off our spatially distant contemporaries: the issue of space and time really does not come into play. Insofar as the Golden Rule has ethical traction, we really cannot excuse ourselves from our responsibility to them.

What we would ideally want is for ourselves to function in the moral calculus of our successors in a way that takes account of our own claims and contributions. And if this is something we would ask of others, then it is something that we ourselves must be prepared to grant to others ourselves. A case for the interests of posterity thus functions as part and parcel of the ideal order to whose cultivation we stand morally committed.

After all, ethics is not respective of persons, and moral obligations in particular include everyone, future people included. This is clearly the case for such moral maxims as: do unto others as you would have them do unto you; strive for the greatest good of the greatest number; and never needlessly do damage to the best interest of others.

We obviously have some responsibility towards our immediate posterity. After all, we are causally responsible for their being in the world. And we have a quasi-contractual agreement with them: We'll take care of you when young; you'll take care of us when old. But our remote descendancy is something else again. To undertake responsibility toward them—to concern ourselves for their well-being and operations, even to make sacrifices on their behalf—is not a duty but a laudable work of supererogation that is not a response to claims that they have upon us. In assuming responsibility for them we gain credit, not because we are fulfilling an obligation of some sort, but because we are doing something that makes us into better people than we otherwise would be—something in the doing of which we can take justifiable pride. For

by caring from them we have succeeded in making the world a better place than it otherwise would be—and ourselves better people. Insofar as a duty is involved, it is a matter of duty to ourselves.

It seems plausible to contend that we have an interest in the condition of our distant posterity insofar as we choose to take such an interest, so that the matter altogether depends on us. What difference would it make for us if human life were not to survive over 1,000 generations hence?

For some reason, it seems that we cannot quite bring ourselves to look on that futurity with total indifference. We naturally value certain causes and principles that the extinction of human life would irreparably damage. Without human persons, there would no longer be scope for human justice; without intelligent beings, there could be no honesty, no honor, no efforts in the face of adversity, none of those many virtues we respect and prize. Many things that mean much to us personally would cease to exist, and the value of the world—our world—would thereby be diminished. Insofar as we are by nature beings drawn to such a view of things, the condition of distant posterity does actually matter *to us*, as something that matters *for us*. So, in the end, indifference is not an option.

Whenever we are grateful to our predecessors for something they have done for our benefit, we should (by priority or reasoning) be mindful of doing likewise for our successors. The things we deem fitting for our antecedents to have done for us, *their* posterity, we must likewise deem qualified as calls upon us for the benefit of our posterity.

It is often said that “life is unfair,” and this dictum is never truer than in relation with transgenerational issues. For in fact the present generation makes innumerable decisions with regard to matters in which future generations have a profound stake and yet no say whatsoever. For us, posterity’s interests here come into play only vicariously—that is, only insofar as we internalize them by way of taking an interest in them and making their interests a part of our own. We have an interest in them (that is a stake in their well-being) only insofar as we *decide* to make it so. Yet, all the same, their interests—their welfare and well-being—are largely in our hands, and there is nothing they can do about it (except perhaps to complain when it is too late for any remedy). What could be less fair than that?

While most of our obligations stem from agreements and understandings that establish duties to others, some of them are obligations that we automatically have to ourselves, and their defaults are not open to reprehension by others but rather open the door to self-reproach. The category includes not only the obligation to make something of our talents and our opportunities for doing good but also our care for our parents and grandparents, and even for animals and of the environment—obligations none of which results from agreements of any sort, actual or virtual. This sort of reflexive obligation to make ourselves into good people is at issue with our future generations. The obligations involved here are not so much duties we owe to them as duties we owe to *ourselves*. For total indifference toward other people would discredit us as hard-headed and deprive us of what could and ideally would be one of life's satisfactions and rewards. What is at issue here is an ethical responsibility that issues from the larger metaphysical obligation to make ourselves into good people.

Just how much do we owe to posterity? What sort of sacrifice can one reasonably ask of this generation for the sake of rendering the conditions of its successors better than it would otherwise likely be? Presumably a good deal, as far as the next generation or two are concerned. They are people we know and love in some measure, and in whose well-being we have a personal stake. In any event, the next generation is an object of special concern because through it alone the existence of further generations can possibly be realized. Still, with the passage of time—say ten, let alone fifty generations—the picture grows murkier.

But one consideration is sure and should be handled with care. In considering our relation to our remote posterity, there is daunting and ominous disparity that has to give us pause: while we are not in a position to do much good, we indeed are in a position to do great harm. The upward potential is very small, and yet we can do them great and irreparable damage by way of damage to the planet or even more disastrously by effectively extinguishing human life through atomic warfare. It is a tragic fact that we can do so little on the positive side and so much on the negative. But there is nothing laudable about an indifferentism that looks uncaringly into the prospect that *après nous le déluge*.

Yet even if our stance toward future generations is ever so well intentioned and helpful, there are still substantial, albeit unwelcome, limits to what we can effectively do. Suppose, for example, that we adopt measures for population control to avert undue pressure on limited resources, and then there unforeseeably emerges an uncontrollable disease that pushes the reduced population below the level of survivability. The reality is that even our best-intentioned actions can unforeseeably have unfortunate and unintended long-range consequences. We are massively underinformed about the situation of future generations. So how can we effectively act to foster their needs and desiderata when we do not know just what these are? No doubt they will care for life, liberty, and happiness, but what if their circumstances have the interests of one (say, life and health) come into conflict with those of another (say, liberty of action)? Action on posterity's behalf can be a tricky business.

So why should it be supposed that we have grounds for special concern for our own descendants? The pivot seems to lie in the fact of human limitations: we cannot effectively engage ourselves with the concern of everyone as a whole, so the scope of our effective engagement has to be limited, and genealogical distance seems to be a natural mode of concentration. A bequest of \$1 million spread over an entire citizenry amounts to a small fraction of a cent's benefit to each individual, which is a benefit that means nothing to anyone. But if spread over the limited members of one's near-term familial posterity, that same sum can constructively contribute to many lives. Considerations of abstract justice yield way to considerations of pragmatic efficiency, but that is not the end of the story.

What obligates us to care for the interest of our posterity is not some sort of fictitious contract. Rather, it is our own reflexive obligation to profit by opportunities for the good—specifically, to make ourselves into the sort of beings who can take justifiable pride in what they do. The intention here is much the same as that involved in the care for the welfare of animals, the avoidance of vandalism, and respecting the tombs and monuments of the dead. It is neither our responsibility to the beneficiaries at issue, nor yet our duty to those of our contemporaries who take an interest in these sorts of things; rather, it is, in the final analysis, a part of our duty to ourselves.

VIII

Ethical Issues: Their Concern for Us. As the preceding considerations indicate, we are bound to be very imperfectly informed about the cognitive stance of future generations, and we can say but very little regarding what they will think. But we are even worse off with respect to their evaluative stance, and we can only speak with less assurances about what they will value—even merely in regard to cognitive values (importance, significance, interest). And when it comes to their aesthetic or moral value (of beauty and its lack, and of justice and its contrary) there is virtually nothing we can assert with unalloyed confidence.

It does not take a great stretch of imagination to see that our successors may think differently from ourselves about matters of mores, morals, and public policy. Thought two centuries hence in these matters may well differ from that of the present as much as ours does from that of our Victorian ancestors. The abortion practices of the present, the regulatory rigmarole in economic affairs, and the penchant for managing public affairs via the judiciary rather than the legislature exemplify matters on which our successors two centuries hence may well judge us harshly.

As integral to conscientious morality, people should care for what others, or at least their sensible fellows, think of them and their doings. Insofar as we have reasons to hope that our posterity will have its share of sensible people, we need to have some care for what they will think of us.

At this point the question arises: Will they be judging us by our standards or by theirs? We ourselves have little hesitation about judging our predecessors by our standards. However unjust or unreasonable this may be, it is nevertheless what we generally do. We cannot reasonably expect that our posterity will do otherwise.

But we cannot know what those standards may be, which tends to render the whole matter moot. So the best we can do is to shelve the problem, to be firm and consistent in applying our own standards in our own case, making sure that these standards have some sound and solid rationale of their own.

Obvious requisites of conservation and preservation apart, acting for the benefit of our immediate posterity is difficult and challenging,

and acting for the benefit of more distant successors even more so. The contingencies of fate create insuperable obstacles, and arrangements of man such as the abolition of entail and laws against perpetuities make it even more so. There is little we can do to provide benefits even to our immediate progeny in whose interests our own stake is presumably personally greatest. Granted, there are some more or less permanent goods that can be transmitted—but real estate is subject to disasters of nature, and gold and other valuables to those of man. Perhaps the only thing of permanent value we can try to provide to them is a good example by those standards that, having stood the test of time since antiquity, hold good promise for the future as well.

The contingency of human affairs means that we have all too little information about remotely future generations. Their problem, however, is the reverse: not of too little information about our generation, but too much. Their knowledge of our generations will be impeded by the fact that there are also so many other intervening generations to know about. We can hardly expect that they would bestow much attention on us.

Does our distant familial posterity really owe us anything? Does it have an obligation to render us acknowledgement, appreciation, or respect, individually or collectively? Individually—presumably not, seeing that almost certainly they will not know much, if anything, about us as individuals. As one goes back through many generations, one encounters an unmanageably large manifold of people. And so, when we figure as part of someone's antecedence, we are invariably there along with innumerable others, indeed more people for attention than can be fitted into any manageable agenda. So it would be unrealistic for us to expect that those future people would take much heed of us as individuals.

The extent of our familial concern diminishes even more rapidly as we move inward into increasing degrees of cousinhood than it does as we move downward along the scale of genealogical descent. In the usual course of things, we feel greater concern for our grandchildren than our first cousins (even though the latter share more of one's DNA than the former). Concern is the product of largely cultural factors that have evolved under the pressure of social efficiency in providing for successive generations. Accordingly, the analogy between synchronous

genealogical distance and dichromic genealogical distance is not rigid. But at great distances the difference becomes negligible.

Causal impact, like gravity, diminishes with distance. We can exert more impetus on what happens near to us than on what is far way, be it in space or time. Barring a planetary catastrophe, whatever impact we can have on the weal or woe of distant generations is rather minimal, and there is rather little they can do for us. But not nothing. For to whatever extent they take notice of us and, above all, of the causes and values we hold near and dear, they will be doing things that are of interest to us in every sense of that flexible term.

Of course, the nearer generation are of far greater significance for us than those more remote. After all, the only things we can possibly do on behalf of those later generations will have to be transmitted through, or at least maintained by, the nearer generations, who are obviously in a position to unravel our best efforts to reach posterity—to disassemble our pyramids, so to speak. Our access to distant generations is largely at the mercy of the intervening generations. To be sure, immediate posterity matters most to us. Here we can see more clearly what can effectively be done. Moreover, blood is thicker than water, and facticity produces congeniality. In the near term we owe special consideration and take special interest in our children and grandchildren. How far does this extend? When we think about the world of 300 generations hence, does DNA matter—and should it? As the contingencies of life thin out the continuities of connecting—as public individuals are no longer identifiable at all, and individuals fade into the mass of humanity—the contemplation of individuals as such becomes impracticable, and they blend indistinguishably in the mass of humanity. Our concern for the distant future, such as it is, has to be not for our own descendants but for humanity at large.

After all, we have no clue what role, if any, our personal descendency will play in our posterity. But in the long run that doesn't matter. What matters most to us and what we will principally care for is not the survival of our DNA but the survival of our values, of the sorts of things that, like virtues, culture, devotion, and religion, number among the abstractions that matter to us. The Spanish philosopher Unamuno lamented *el sentimiento trágico de la vida* engendered by the certainty of death, but the thought that all the things I care for go into the grave with me is more troubling than the thought of death itself.

If these things are to survive, they are wholly at the mercy of our posterity.

IX

Issues of Inquiry Methodology: The Basic Analogy. What sector of the present will survive into the future is always a problematic question. For survival into the more remote future will depend on what is done in the near term, and like so much else about the future this itself is uncertain and presently imponderable. If restored to life, many an Egyptian pharaoh would reflect with sorrow on the theme of the present's impotence regarding the future.

To be sure, information is generally more secure than things. Our access to Greek mathematics is in even better shape than our access to Greek architecture. But on every side preservation is determined by subsequent action, something that lies at the mercy of transient interests, concerns, and occupations.

We cannot obtain information about the human condition in the future by direct observational means. Instead, we must take recourse to indirect methods, and here the prominent instrument at our disposal will be analogy. Here the basic analogy of two essentially equivalent relationships will stand before us as our sole cognitive gateway to understanding:

WE : THEY :: OUR ANTERIORITY : US.

Or, equivalently,

THEY : US :: WE : OUR ANTERIORITY.

Their condition vis-à-vis ourselves is roughly the same as our condition vis-à-vis that of our predecessors. So to obtain a rough idea of how the situation of our successors of 100 years compares to ours, for example, the best available procedure is to consider how our situation relates to that of 100 years ago.

Perhaps one qualification should be made. Various theorists since Henry Adams envision an ongoingly accelerated pace of sociotechnological change. So if we are to look ahead for 100 years via the basic analogy, then we should look back not just 100 but, say, 300 years. Other theorists envision a process transformational deceleration

and would consequently see looking back only 50 years for realistic guidance. In any case, such a modified perspective would not unravel the fundamental structure of the larger lesson at issue, namely, that we face a future that is radically different in ways that cannot possibly be foreseen in any detail. Accordingly, our efforts on behalf of posterity's welfare, insofar as we make them, would be seen as a part of a virtual contract, a deal giving our concern for their well-being in exchange for their retrospective concern with us and our activities—an idealized bargain effecting an exchange across the insuperable chasm of time.

Traditional Chinese wisdom has it that “every human should have a child, write a book, and plant a tree.” I am tempted to add “build a house” to the list. A common rationale invites these decidedly disparate actions: All are ventures of reaching out into a future we ourselves will not live to see. They are all actions that extend beyond our reach and impact the world beyond the point where we ourselves cease to be there. They reflect our personal involvement with the future and offer those who succeed us a useful token of our own personal stake in the world's ongoing process.

The very fact that we know so little about the posterity means that some special presumptions are in order. After all, for aught we know:

- Some of our personal descendency or family members may be among them.
- There may well be among them also people with whom we have a kinship of spirit.
- These are the only people through whose mediation our own values and interests may be kept alive.

Given this situation, we have to acknowledge that we have a real stake in the future, even when its condition grows to be remote.

Our relationship to distant posterity raises challenging questions throughout the range of philosophical concern, be it metaphysical, ethical, sociological, epistemological, and even religious. Yet, while undeniably important, that relationship remains largely neglected in present-day philosophy. There does not seem to be a single philosophical dictionary, handbook, or encyclopedia that has an entry under the word “posterity.”