The Tyranny of the Contemporary
Stephen M. Gardiner
Department of Philosophy and Program on Values in Society
University of Washington, Seattle
WORKING DRAFT
(For CHAPTER 5 of A Perfect Moral Storm, Oxford, Forthcoming.)

"The politicians in Copenhagen have the power to shape history’s judgment on this
generation: one that saw a challenge and rose to it, or one so stupid that we saw calamity
coming but did nothing to avert it."

Editorial run by 56 newspapers worldwide in the run up to the Copenhagen Meeting

"I'll be frank with you. I don't spend a lot of time really worrying about short-term history.
I guess I don't worry about long-term history, either, since I'm not going to be around to
read it."

Former US President George W. Bush on leaving office

We turn now to the intergenerational storm. I believe that the distant future poses a
severe moral problem, the nature and extent of which has not yet been adequately
appreciated. This problem is in some ways analogous to the problem of the tyranny of the
majority that has played a large role in political theory historically. Hence, I call it the
“tyranny of the contemporary”. This tyranny can take many forms. The main aim of this
chapter is to give a brief, initial account of its most perspicuous form by describing the
central problem of intergenerational buck-passing and its main features.

I will also argue for three claims about the status of the central problem. First, it is
the core concern of distinctively intergenerational ethics. It explains both why conceiving
of the ethics of the future in terms of generations makes moral sense, and what is
distinctive about generational issues. Second, it occurs in a pure, long-term form manifest
across human history and global populations, but also in degenerate forms that apply to
shorter time periods and to social institutions. Third, it is manifest in the real world. In
practice, it is neither rendered inert by fortuitous circumstance, nor overwhelmed by other
future-oriented difficulties. I will illustrate this through a discussion of our leading example,
global climate change.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section I, I posit several serious challenges to
the idea that it makes moral sense to think in terms of generations. In section II, I

---

2 My position contrasts with that of Bryan Norton. Norton says:

“The philosophical problem of what we owe the future is not a single, monolithic problem, but rather an
inter-related cluster of problems. For convenience, we group these sub-problems into three categories and
give them somewhat descriptive names. They are: (1) the distance problem – how far into the future do our
moral obligations extend? … (2) the ignorance problem – who will future people be and how can we
identify them? And, how can we know what they will want or need, or what rights they will insist on? …
and (3) the typology of effects problem – how can we determine which of our actions truly have moral

I do not want to claim that the problem of future generations is monolithic, nor would I deny that Norton’s
perceptive classification of sub-problems is useful. But I do think (a) that none of the sub-problems Norton
identifies is exclusive to the future, and (b) that even collectively they fail to make clear why (at least some) ethical
issues concerning the future should be conceived of in generational terms. My account, on the other hand, explains
why there is a distinctively intergenerational problem about the future. Writers who may see the fundamental issue
in terms close to my own include Goodin 1999, 247-254, and O’Neill 1993, 46-50. In the last section of the chapter,
I explain why Norton’s sub-problems do not overwhelm the issue I identify.
introduce the central problem as a way of overcoming these challenges, using a playful example I call the Fairy Tale. In section III, I explain why this intergenerational problem has a particularly difficult structure; and in section IV, I describe its features in more detail. In sections V-VII, I consider various obstacles to the application of the model, including the fact of intergenerational overlap among humans, the possibility of an invisible hand mechanism that drives social progress, and the philosophical non-identity problem.

I. Problems with 'Generations'

Ethical issues concerning future people are usually conceived of as problems of future generations. But this practice requires defense. For it makes two important assumptions: first, that it is both possible and useful to divide all of those who will exist into groups of contemporaries; and second, that this is the morally salient way of conceiving of them. But neither of these claims is obviously correct.

Consider first the attempt to divide humanity as a whole into generations. This faces a significant prima facie objection. Individuals do not come into and out of existence as temporally discrete classes. On the contrary, there is a continuum of entry and exit, a revolving door of births and deaths. In addition, even if one agrees that humanity should be so divided, the presence of the continuum raises difficult questions about exactly how and where generations should be individuated. Consider just three central issues.

First, there is the matter of determining the size of a generational unit. For example, some people define a generation in terms of replacement (e.g., the amount of time it takes for children to take the place of their parents); others do so in terms of the possibility of mutual interaction (e.g., future people are those whom people presently alive will not live to meet); and still others take a generation to be all those currently alive (so the relevant excluded group is those not yet born). This discrepancy is important in itself. After all, which unit should we choose? But it is also important because the choice of generational unit makes a great practical difference: the first definition suggests new generations at intervals of about 30 years\(^3\), the second roughly 200 years, and the last about 100.

The second central issue is that, whatever the unit, there is the issue of determining an appropriate starting-point for each generation. For one thing, this choice can have a crucial impact on how – or even whether – a problem is seen in intergenerational terms. Consider the following illustration. Say that one takes the position that a new generation appears every 30 years, and that one is trying to describe the bulk of the twentieth century in these terms. Suppose then that one is trying to decide whether to start the generational scheme in 1901, 1911 or 1921\(^4\), and that one takes this to yield three relevant generational streams:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1(^{st}) Generation</th>
<th>2(^{nd}) Generation</th>
<th>3(^{rd}) Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

\(^3\) Notice that much here depends on what replacement is taken to consist in. Thirty years assumes a Western model. But if to replace is simply to provide a net income to the family rather than a net loss, in some societies this will occur in late childhood, and a generation may be a mere 8-15 years; if to replace is to become (say) a village elder, a generation may be much longer (50-70 years)\(^?\).

\(^4\) Of course, there are infinitely many other possibilities: 1907, August of 1908, 24\(^{th}\) December 1909 at 5 p.m., and so on.
Then, the choice of stream may make a very significant difference. For example, Stream 1 puts the cultural revolution of the Sixties in one generation (1961-1990), and WWII in another (1931-1960); but the second puts them together (1941-1970).

More generally, there is the question of how one goes about choosing one starting-point over another. In practice, much actual talk of generations seems to be indexed to major historical and social events or experiences, such as World War II, and the so-called Baby Boom. But it is not immediately obvious either why any particular event or experience should be chosen over another to define a generation, or more importantly, why we should think that such divisions are morally relevant. Presumably, it would be odd to start speaking of the “Nixon Goes to China generation”, or the “Gilligan’s Island generation”. So, what makes “the Baby Boom generation” better? In demography the divisions between different generations are apparently often based on individual’s self-reports of the major historical events occurring during their own lifetimes. But to be relevant to intergenerational ethics, this practice would require further justification. Do we really want goods and opportunities to be allocated to people on this basis? If so, why?

The third central issue concerns what to say about intergenerational overlap. For one thing, on most definitions of the generational unit, one generation may be physically present during the "time" of another generation and affected by what occurs. For example, the Baby Boomers did not simply disappear when Generation X first arrived on the scene on or around 1965, when they began to reach the age of replacement in 1995, or even with the election of the first post-Baby Boom President (Barack Obama) late in 2008. But, given this, how do we deal with these "lingering generations"? Similarly, individuals have different life-spans, so that while some people's entire lives may occur within a single generation, others may overlap with three or four generations. So, there is a question about whether we should treat the “persistent lingerers” differently.

These three issues imply both that any concrete proposal for a generational division requires specific defense, and that in many contexts this will make a great deal of difference to how and whether one conceives of a given problem in intergenerational terms. This already puts pressure on distinctively intergenerational ethics. But there is also a second, more general worry. Is it even morally desirable to make such divisions? Clearly, some rationale is needed for seeking to divide humanity into temporal classes in the first place. We must ask why might it be useful to speak of ethical obligations to future people in generational terms. For example, why not theorize purely in individualist terms, speaking only of future persons and how they are affected as such? Or, alternatively, why not focus on the overall long-term interests of a particular group (e.g., one’s family, community, or nation)? Such divisions are familiar from normal political theorizing. So, why not leave it at that?

My proposal is that the use of the concept of a generation to structure talk of ethics and the future can be made sense of indirectly. Talk of “generations” gains its point from the need to confront a certain kind of severe moral problem which is itself best conceived of in generational terms. Given this, an account of intergenerational justice is one that provides an answer to the severe problem, since that is the point of a distinctively intergenerational theory. One advantage of this approach will be that it can explain and accommodate the use of intergenerational language across divergent temporal settings. Since the intergenerational problem can arise for groups of different temporal sizes and

---

5 The example works best if one is talking about the United States, since it became embroiled in World War II in November 1941, with the attack on Pearl Harbor. But, of course, nothing much depends on the example.

6 See, for example, Schuman and Scott 1989.

7 There is some doubt among those who classify in this way as to whether President Obama really counts as a Baby Boomer, a member of Generation X, or something in between. But the general point remains.
over different time frames, it makes sense to be flexible about what one is willing to count as a generation.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{II. Intergenerational Buck-Passing}

To motivate this way of thinking, let us begin with an admittedly flippant example, which I shall call “\textit{The Fairy Tale}”.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{1. The Fairy Tale}

\textit{The Fairy Tale} proceeds as follows:

"Once upon a time, there was a generation that confronted great challenges and survived them. It struggled through a time of global financial collapse, defeated a frightening, destructive and evil enemy, and ostensibly made the world safer for freedom and democracy for generations to come. This generation inherited a mess, but cleaned it up and passed on a better world to the future. It earned the moniker, "the Most Splendid Generation".

The Most Splendid Generation was succeeded by another generation, ‘the Bloopers’. This generation had a reputation in its youth for grand visions and moral seriousness ("Peace, Love and Understanding"); however, when it actually came to hold the reigns of power, it became more consumed by the pleasures of the moment, and self-aggrandizement ("Sex, Drugs and Reality TV"). Given this, it paid scant attention to the concerns of the future, and indulged in whatever activities it could that brought it soft comforts and profit in the short-term, regardless of the long-term consequences. For example, the Bloopers deregulated the financial markets leaving the world vulnerable to a Great Depression-like crash; they provoked an international arms race and allowed the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, making future wars more likely, and more destructive; they polluted the natural environment with wild abandon, undermining the future integrity of the world’s climate system and food supply; and so on. In short, the Bloopers lived fast and loose, caring little whether others suffered greatly and died young because of it. (Indeed, the succeeding generations quipped that one of the Bloopers' favorite anthems should have been reworded: “I hope I die before you get old”.)

As things turned out, serious harms were indeed inflicted on the following successive generations (call them the Xmen, the Yurts, and the Zeds) as a direct result of the behavior of the Bloopers. These generations really did see global financial collapses, horrific wars, environmental catastrophes, widespread famines, and so on. Like the Most Splendid generation before them, it was left to them to clean up a mess.

What should we say about \textit{The Fairy Tale}? Does it have any moral import? Are there any lessons about intergenerational ethics to be learned from it? The obvious answer is

\textsuperscript{8} In this book, I am focusing on future-oriented difficulties: how earlier generations may act badly with respect to later generations. But the model I suggest is also relevant for past-oriented problems. If earlier generations have legitimate interests in what happens after their members are all dead, and if later generations have some moral reason to take those interests into account in their behavior, then if the later generations ignore these reasons, they may be taking advantage of temporal asymmetry in a morally reprehensible way. (See later footnote on overlap.)

\textsuperscript{9} The label reflects the fact that the example is intended to amuse, rather than accuse. Though it uses terms that bear some relation to the real world, this is only to help bring out the intuitions I want to discuss. Some will detect a grain of truth in the example, but we should be cautious about thinking that it is anything more than a grain. Real intergenerational relations are complex, with much good and bad being done by each generation. (See, however, Willetts 2009, which was released just as this book went to press.)
that there are. Our hypothetical “Bloopers” are a profligate generation. They squander their inheritance and the hard work of their predecessors, and they inflict serious harms on their successors. Moreover, they do all of this for the sake of cheap pleasures, and the comforts of easy living. Such a generation would receive harsh criticism from both the future and the past, and this criticism would be well deserved. Indeed, they should be ashamed of themselves. They fail to discharge their intergenerational responsibilities. Too much goes wrong on their watch, and too much of this is self-inflicted. Who would want to be a member of such a generation? Who would want to be implicated in its behavior?

*The Fairy Tale* is a useful hypothetical case. Moreover, it suggests the beginnings of a more serious analysis of intergenerational ethics. Presumably, the Bloopers do wrong for many reasons. One is that they fail the past. They let down their predecessors (i.e., the Most Splendid and presumably at least some of those who came before them) by undermining the legitimate efforts of these earlier generations in favor of the further future. This is perhaps a controversial reason, and one whose shape is difficult to explain philosophically. After all, many will refuse to concede that there could be obligations to those who are now dead, as some previous generations are. Nevertheless, in my view, it is an important part of the explanation of why what the Bloopers do is wrong.

Still, I will leave this consideration aside here in order to focus on a set of reasons that are arguably more central and easier to explain. The Bloopers go wrong because they inflict serious harms on their successors, and without adequate justification for doing so. (They inflict real suffering on others for the sake of easy pleasures and comparatively trivial comforts. Their wantonness is just that – wanton.) Moreover, they are able to do this only because they take advantage of those who are extremely vulnerable and cannot defend themselves: those in the future who are either not yet born, or else not yet old enough either to understand what is being done, or to do something about it.

2. The Central Problem

In my view, we can make sense of these reactions to *The Fairy Tale* by invoking a more general analysis. This begins with a sketch of the problem in its starkest and most abstract form. Consider the following schematic example.

*The Pure Scenario*

Imagine a world that consists of a sequence of groups of inhabitants over a length of time. Suppose that the membership of the groups does not overlap (i.e., no member of one group is also a member of another), and that each group is temporally distinct (in the sense that they inhabit the world at different times and not contemporaneously). Suppose also that the only causal influence of one group on another is forward-looking: earlier groups can affect later groups in the sequence, but no later group has any causal impact on any earlier group. Add to this that each group has preferences that are predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) concerned with events that happen during the timeframe of its own existence. In other words, it cares primarily about what takes place while it is around, and much less (if at all) about later events.\(^{10}\) Finally, suppose that each group has access to goods that are temporally dispersed. In particular, consider two types of such goods.\(^{11}\) The first are such that their benefits accrue to the group that produces them, but their costs are substantially deferred, and fall on later groups. Call these ‘front-loaded goods’. Goods of the second type are such that their costs accrue to the group that produces them, but their benefits are substantially deferred and arise to later groups. Call these ‘back-loaded goods’.

\(^{10}\) Sometimes I make the narrower assumption that each group is exclusively self-interested (e.g., Gardiner 2003, 2006b). But this is merely for ease of explication. For more on this issue, see chapter 2 (and Gardiner 2003, 2004a).

\(^{11}\) Other types of temporally dispersed goods will also be relevant. I focus on these two for purposes of explanation.
What is likely to happen under The Pure Scenario? Let us begin with a simple (but core) case, focusing on the kind of activity engaged in by the Bloopers.\footnote{This example is parallel to that of the Bloopers in many respects, but also worse in important ways.}

**The Core Example**

Suppose that we are dealing with front-loaded goods of a particular kind. They give modest benefits to the group that consumes them (and only to them), but impose very high costs on all later groups. Under the conditions of the Pure Scenario – where each group is primarily concerned with what happens while it is around – consumption of these goods is to be expected. We would predict that earlier groups will chose to consume the modest benefits available to them and thereby impose very high (and uncompensated) costs on later groups. We might also expect that those further along in the sequence would receive escalating burdens, since the costs will be compounded over time. Later generations bear the costs passed on to them by each one of their predecessors, and the later a generation is, the more predecessors it has.

Consider a simple numerical illustration. Suppose that the sequence of groups is ABCDE. Then, if each group consumes front-loaded goods that benefit it by X but cost each later group 10X, then the overall impacts on each group are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Benefits to Each Group</th>
<th>Costs to Each Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>10X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>20X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>30X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>40X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In short, A absorbs no costs, C takes on 20X, and E must confront 40X. Moreover, if the practice were to continue, matters would only get worse. For example, if it went on to Z, it would be 260X; if there were 100 groups, the 100\textsuperscript{th} would have to cope with 990X.

Intuitively, The Core Example poses a moral problem. Other things being equal, it is hard to see how the practice it portrays could be justified. There are perhaps different ways of describing what has gone wrong. It seems highly plausible to say that the infliction of high costs on later groups for the sake of modest benefits for oneself is at least unfair or unjust.\footnote{Suppose we assume that fairness requires some kind of impartiality between affected parties. The world envisioned violates impartiality by allowing for costs to be visited on future groups for the benefit of earlier groups, even when there is no compensation, and where the benefits are small and the costs large and potentially catastrophic.} Depending on the case, one might also want to add (or substitute) that it is thoughtless, reckless, selfish, cruel, or callous (to mention but a few options\footnote{For example, under some circumstances, it may also manifest exploitation and domination. (See Bertram 2009; Nolt 2010.)}). Still, that there is a moral problem of some kind seems clear enough. This is especially so if the costs passed on are actual physical harms (such as suffering, disease and death), or if they are catastrophic for some future group (e.g., by rendering their homeland uninhabitable), and if the benefits appear to be luxury items (e.g., exotic vacations on the other side of the planet) or comparatively trivial (e.g., the extra comfort and status provided by an unnecessarily large and inefficient vehicle). Then, the moral problem seems severe.

The Core Example describes an especially clear case of intergenerational buck-passing. There are several reasons for its basic appeal. One is presumably the inequity
suggested by the trade of modest benefits for very high costs. This already suggests that the profligate generation is making a moral exception of itself, unfairly favoring its own interests over those of others. But when the costs rise to the level of catastrophic evils (such as mass starvation, and death), and the benefits are minor (such as bigger cars, and cheaper, more exotic vacations), this becomes an especially serious kind of moral wrong, showing that one group has little or no regard at all for others, and far too much regard for itself.

Another reason for the appeal of The Core Example is the infliction of very high costs on others per se. (Note that there is no mention of compensation or consent.) Such inflictions often violate negative duties not to harm, and these are usually regarded as especially stringent moral duties. In particular, many people believe that violations of negative duties not to harm are much more serious, from the moral point of view, than violations of positive duties to aid. A failure to help, though often morally serious, they say, is just not as bad as an intentional infliction of harm.

For such reasons, The Core Example presents an especially compelling case of moral concern. (It is not difficult to see it as a tyranny.) Still, it seems plausible that the basic problem can be generalized to include the other kinds of temporally dispersed goods included in The Pure Scenario. Let me first sketch this extension and then try to clarify it through a response to some questions.

Here is the extension. In The Pure Scenario, each group is predominantly concerned with events that happen during the timeframe of its own existence. Hence, we expect each group to oversupply front-loaded goods and undersupply back-loaded goods quite generally. That is, we predict that in general each group will engage in what we might call “buck passing behavior”. Each will secure benefits for itself by illegitimately imposing costs on its successors, and avoid costs to itself by illegitimately failing to benefit its successors. The Core Example captures one central case of this, but the underlying problem is much more general. Moreover, it has similar implications. For one thing, each group in the sequence of groups faces the same incentive structure when it has the power to act; hence, we expect the buck passing to be iterated. Given the opportunity to engage in buck passing, every group in the sequence will do so. For another, given the iteration, the buck passing is likely to have cumulative effects. The negative impacts will be worse for more distant groups than for those who come earlier in the sequence, since the costs passed on to them are likely to be compounded.

I propose that we give this problem two names. The first is descriptive. In my view, this generalized version of the buck-passing problem nicely captures the central form of the tyranny of the contemporary. This is so even though its direct application is sharply restricted, especially by the fact that it assumes no generational overlap, and considers only goods with a simple distributive profile (i.e., the front-loaded and back-loaded goods). For I contend that degenerate forms of the problem remain even in the presence of generational overlap and more complex temporally-extended goods. For this reason, I propose that we call the problem, “the Central Problem of Intergenerational Buck-Passing” (CPIBP or simply “the central problem”).

The second name makes a claim about the status of the central problem. In my view, this is also the core problem of distinctively intergenerational ethics. First, it explains why it is important to think specifically in terms of generations. If we are worried about the kind of ethical problem constituted by buck-passing in a temporal sequence, generations are morally relevant groupings, since isolating them helps to reveal that

---

15 Note that to say that the buck-passing problem is the central problem of distinctively intergenerational ethics is not by itself to claim that it is the core problem of the ethics of the future, or of intertemporal ethics more generally (including the past, present and the future), since there may be intertemporal issues that are not best seen in generational terms. Nevertheless, I do believe that it is at least one core concern of such ethics, and that the global environmental tragedy makes it especially prominent, and pressing.
problem. Second, it can account for the wide disparities in the way the term ‘generation’ is used. Since the collective action problem can arise in many contexts, and over very different periods of time, it is easy to see why the scope of a “generation” varies dramatically in different contexts, from hundreds of years, to just a few. For these reasons, I also call the central problem, “the Pure Intergenerational Problem” (PIP).  

3. Clarifications

In the next section, I will go on to describe why the central problem is so challenging. But before doing so, some clarifications are in order. Hence, in the remainder of this section I will offer some quick responses to four natural questions about the analysis.

The first question is as follows. In describing the central problem, why do I speak of the ‘oversupply’ and ‘undersupply’ of certain goods, and the illegitimate imposing of costs and failures to benefit? Such words seem to presuppose some background normative benchmark against which actual distributions are to be assessed. But why presuppose that? Indeed, doesn’t it amount to begging the question in an important way?

This query is correct in its claim that the central problem presupposes some normative benchmark of appropriate consumption. The reason for this is that I do not want to assume that there ought to be no consumption of temporally diffuse goods under any circumstances. Presumably, there are some costs that it is justifiable to pass on to the future, and some things that earlier generations ought to do for posterity. A full theory of intergenerational ethics would, I assume, tell us what these requirements are. Acting in accordance with such requirements would not count as “buck-passing”, since the term already includes the idea of something illegitimate. Hence, a correct theory of intergenerational ethics would not be vulnerable to the central problem; on the contrary, it would solve it.

This point is important because it implies that intergenerational buck-passing is not a completely general problem. In particular, it does not arise for theorists who deny that genuine questions can be raised about the intergenerational distribution of goods, or claim that any current generation is morally permitted to do completely as it pleases with temporally diffuse (and other) goods. Such positions are, no doubt, worthy of philosophical discussion. Still, I shall ignore them here. In my view, they appear in serious conflict with some basic moral intuitions, and remain very much minority opinions. So, for present purposes, it is safe to leave them aside. I do not think that this amounts to begging the question against any major opponent. In practice, the fact that the central problem arises for all positions that accept any substantive claims of intergenerational justice renders it highly relevant for philosophical and political discussion. In short, my view is (first) that though the central problem makes some moral assumptions, most people will think that these are very minimal, and (second) that the burden of proof is clearly on those who doubt this to make their case.

The second natural question is: Why do I make the central problem so broad? In particular, why include both back-loaded and front-loaded goods? And why not focus on just one kind of front-loaded good, that discussed in The Core Example [where one generation

---

16 Why do I insist on having two labels for the same problem? (Isn’t this a bit extravagant? Can’t I just make up my mind?) The answer is that although in general, I prefer the ‘PIP’ label, I also recognize that the claims about its status may be contentious. Thus, the more descriptive, ‘CPIBP’ label is available for occasions when one wants to discuss the problem without having to assert that it is central in the way I have suggested. Again, I am trying to prevent tangential theoretical squabbles from undermining the main analysis.

17 In other words, doesn’t it assume something that no one who did not already concede the existence of the PIP would have no reason to accept?

18 Of course, it may also have to solve other problems. Though I claim that the PIBP is the central problem of distinctively intergenerational ethics, I do not assert that it is the only problem, or that other issues that are not essentially generational in form are not relevant to a full theory.
inflicts very high costs on future generations, for the sake of modest benefits for itself? Given what I say about inequities and negative duties above, doesn’t The Core Example give us a more compelling account of the central problem of intergenerational ethics?

In reply, I do think that The Core Example presents an especially perspicuous kind of intergenerational problem (that’s why it is core, after all), so I admit that I am somewhat tempted by the proposal to restrict the scope of the central problem.\textsuperscript{19} Still, overall, I am comfortable extending the claim about centrality to include both other kinds of front-loaded goods and back-loaded goods under the general umbrella. There are two main reasons.

The first reason is that some failures to benefit future generations seem so egregious as to be on a par with many inflictions of harm. Suppose, for example, that the correct theory of intergenerational justice requires a given generation to aid its successors by providing them with a modestly-priced asteroid detection system. Assume that this generation is aware of the obligation; but also that it takes a while to build the system, so that it cannot benefit. Suppose then that the earlier generation fails to supply the detection system because it has some pet project of its own that it wants to pursue instead (e.g., a massive Millennial fireworks display). As a result, the next generation is decimated by an asteroid collision that might have been avoided if the system had been online. This looks like a plausible example of a central intergenerational failure to me, and so seems to warrant inclusion.

The second reason to broaden the claim about centrality is theoretical. On reflection, I suspect that further work needs to be done to grasp the central wrongs gestured at by The Core Example and these extensions, and that this will require taking more substantive positions in moral and political theory. Given this, for present purposes it seems wise to cast the net widely, but without prejudging too many normative questions. Going further would move us beyond our aim of stating the problem and into developing solutions. But this is a task for another occasion.\textsuperscript{20}

The third, and perhaps most serious, question of clarification also concerns terminology. Why do I use the term ‘intergenerational’ to describe the problem, when the scenario contains no mention of their being a genetic, political or social connection between the successive groups? (For example, why not speak of “the Problem of Sequential Buck-Passing”, or “the Central Predecessors Problem”, or something like that?) This question gets its force from a linguistic claim. The thought is that to be a real generation, a later group must be produced by, or emanate from, a corresponding prior group in some relevant sense, of which literal biological reproduction is the core example. Without such a connection, the thought suggests, we should not speak of “generations” at all.

Much might be said in response to this query. One approach would be just to concede the point and move on. Hence, it might be said that, in practice, the main subjects of the buck-passing analysis will turn out to be groups that are in fact socially, politically and/or genetically related to at least some extent: e.g., nations, institutions, firms, families, and so on. Hence, one might say that, even if we should restrict the scope of the label “the Central Problem of Intergenerational Buck-Passing” to apply only to generations in this richer sense (and so not to groups without the deeper connections), it may still be a very important problem, and central to intergenerational ethics.\textsuperscript{21} Alternatively, another approach would be to claim on independent grounds that the right kind of special relation

\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, I often focus on the core example myself in presenting the PIP.

\textsuperscript{20} I do suggest some small steps in the direction of substantive positions in chapters 8 and 11, and in Gardiner RGT (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{21} In other words, the idea would be to say that the central problem refers to a specific type of predecessor problem. I suspect that some would also then want to deny that predecessor problems are genuine problems considered simply as such, and only accept the intergenerational version as a problem. For example, I can imagine some staunch communitarians or nationalists saying this, since they will think that there can be no obligations of justice beyond borders, since the connections they see as relevant do not hold.
does exist in all cases. So, for example, one might assert that the generations relevant to any particular problem can always be appropriately interlinked in virtue of being members of some larger group, such as (say) humanity, rational agents considered as such (e.g., the Kingdom of Ends), or the community of living beings.

These approaches are, I think, relevant. Still, as a first move, my own inclination is to say that it is both permissible, and indeed common practice, to use the term ‘generation’ in a more minimal sense than the question suggests. We often speak, for example, of “the next generation” of cars or computers or movies (and so on) without presupposing that this will be in any sense produced by the same people who make the current crop of cars or computers or movies (and so on), or by those who are genetically, politically, or socially related to them. Similarly, with regard to people, we refer to “future generations” of campers, students, or Wimbledon champions (and so on), even if these groups are otherwise unrelated. (Suppose, for example, that the “next generation” of Wimbledon champions were all to turn out to be from the planet Vulcan. It is not clear that this fact alone would disqualify them.) But if we can do all of this, why can’t we use the term ‘generation’ in a minimal way to refer to a group in a temporal sequence like that sketched in The Pure Scenario? (Isn’t that roughly what we’d be doing anyway in the case of the extraterrestrial Wimbledon champions?) After all, extending the term “generation” to The Pure Scenario requires only that we are willing to speak of those who inhabit a common world over time in generational terms; and this seems to me unexceptionable.

More importantly, I suspect that the main reason to deny that the language of generations should be used to describe the groups in The Pure Scenario would be if one had some independent theoretical axe to grind. Perhaps the thought is that in practice the deeper “generational” relations (of production, or social, political and genetic connection more generally) will be sufficient to resolve or forestall the central problem. In other words, the intuition is that the problem simply will not arise for true “generational” groups in the richer sense, and so the central problem will lose its claim to be the core problem of intergenerational ethics. This seems to me an important position. Nonetheless, it is one best assessed independently, on its merits, rather than by definitional fiat. Hence, later on in the chapter – in the section on overlap – I will try to say something about why I am not swayed by it.

4. Summary

In summary, in this section I have introduced the central problem of intergenerational buck-passing, and made two main claims about it. The first claim was that, other things being equal, it seems to pose a moral problem. This is clearest in the case of The Core Example, and perhaps front-loaded goods more generally, because it seems unethical for an earlier generation simply to foist costs on a later generation, especially without any compensation and without its consent. But it is also relevant for back-loaded goods. On the (modest) assumption that, other things being equal, any given current generation has an obligation to engage in at least some back-loaded projects (e.g., some with extremely low present costs and extremely high future benefits), then each generation will fail in its duties to the future if it fails to invest in such projects.22

22 Perhaps there would be no moral problem if each generation were to consume to the same extent, so that each takes from the future only as much as has been taken from it by the past. But even this claim is questionable. First, such a situation may be suboptimal, and immoral for this reason, if intergenerational justice requires optimality (or at least suboptimality at a higher level). Second, the response looks best if the relevant costs and benefits are simply passed on from one generation to another. But this raises two obvious issues. For one thing, it seems too neat a picture - many effects of overconsumption are likely to be spread out over many generations, and also to be cumulative. For another, when sanitized in this way the model starts to mimic theories of intergenerational justice that rely on indirect reciprocity across generations. But, of course, it would be no surprise to find that distributions that satisfy a (correct) theory of intergenerational justice are not prey to the CPIBP. Third, it is not clear that
The second claim is that, under some circumstances, the problem may become very serious. For example, in some cases the impacts imposed on future generations may be extremely large. Sometimes this will because the impact of a single generation’s behavior is great; more often, perhaps, it will be because of the substantial cumulative effects of the behavior of many generations. In other cases, the impacts passed on may be of an especially pernicious kind. Most obviously, they might erode the fundamental preconditions of human life and society in ways that might easily have been avoided.

Most people would, I think, accept both that the central problem is a genuine moral problem, and that sometimes it may become very serious. Moreover, given this, they would maintain that we have a moral reason to limit the impact of our generation—relative preferences. The question then becomes how and to what extent such a limitation is to be achieved. To answer this question, we need a theory of intergenerational ethics.

Unfortunately, this leads us to a further problem, which is that we are not currently well placed to offer such a theory. This is part of the theoretical storm that is the subject of the next section of the book (chapters 7 and 8). The remainder of this chapter explores intergenerational buck-passing in more detail, in order to better understand the problem’s import, limits, and wider theoretical context.

III. Intergenerational Buck-Passing vs. The Prisoner’s Dilemma

One reason why the central problem is so important is that it has a peculiarly harsh structure that makes it unusually difficult to resolve. These facts can be brought out by comparison of a specific form of the problem with the more familiar prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons. As we have seen, the familiar collective action problems share two core claims:

(PD1/TC1) It is collectively rational to cooperate: each agent prefers the outcome produced by everyone cooperating over the outcome produced by no one doing so.

(PD2/TC2) It is individually rational not to cooperate: when each agent has the power to decide whether or not she will cooperate, each (rationally) prefers not to do so, whatever the others do.

These claims are paradoxical because given the first it is better for all parties to cooperate than to defect, but given the second the structure of the situation undermines their doing so. In particular, the second claim makes it the case that individuals acting rationally in pursuit of their aims collectively undermine those aims.

If we are to compare this example with the more familiar collective action models, we need to do some translating. To begin with, the central problem makes no mention of “collective rationality” or “cooperation”, but speaks instead in more general terms of the oversupply and undersupply of goods relative to some background theory of justice. Hence, we must be willing to convert talk of buck-passing into the former terms.

distribution is the only thing that matters. For example, if Sammy takes Fred’s lunch and Fred takes John’s lunch and then John takes Sammy’s lunch, they all end up with an equal share (one lunch). Nevertheless, none has his own lunch, and each has a legitimate complaint against one of the others.

Such a limitation might take a number of different forms. For example, perhaps we should subject our generation-relative preferences to certain direct constraints. Alternatively, perhaps we should seek to engage other intergenerational preferences that we either already have or ought to develop.

Some of the material in this section is drawn from Gardiner 2001a (RTC).

This seems to be to the advantage of the central problem. There is a live worry that the terms ‘collectively rational’ and ‘cooperation’ may be too theoretically loaded, and in particular that ultimately we may not be able to describe the correct approach to intergenerational ethics in these terms. (See, for example, Gardiner 2009a and Kumar 2009.)
Fortunately, there is good initial reason to do this, at least as a heuristic. The guiding thought is that at least some departures from what the usual models term “collective rationality” or “cooperation” are likely to be almost universally regarded as ethically problematic. Most notably, if all prefer a certain outcome, behavior that seriously undermines that outcome is likely to be morally lamentable. Given this, if we focus on departures from collective rationality, we highlight a form of buck-passing that almost all moral and political theorists will want their theories to overcome. Hence, accepting the translation can form part of our strategy of couching the general worry about intergenerational storm in minimal terms, by prejudging as few normative questions as possible.26

Suppose then that we envision a paradigm example of intergenerational buck-passing, a case where earlier generations inflict serious and unjustifiable pollution on later generations. How might collective and individual rationality function here? How might this parallel the core claims of the prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons? My suggestion is as follows:

(PIP1) Almost every generation prefers the outcome produced by all generations restricting their pollution over the outcome produced by everyone overpolluting.

(PIP2) When each generation has the power to decide whether or not it will overpollute, each generation prefers to do so, whatever the others do.

The second claim seems unproblematic: PIP2 parallels PD2 and highlights the incentive for intergenerational buck-passing. The first claim, however, is more contentious. PIP1 constitutes an optimistic assumption about mutual compatibility of the aims of different generations. For example, in some cases of buck-passing it may be that a significant number of generations are prepared to suffer the high costs inflicted by their predecessors so long as they retain the ability to pass on even higher costs to their successors. In such cases, PIP1 would be false, but there might still be a serious ethical problem. This reveals that this gloss on the paradigm pollution example actually constitutes a very generous reading of it. More pessimistic claims might be made that showed bleaker prospects for intergenerational cooperation, and so made the buck-passing problem much worse than the familiar prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons. Models incorporating these claims would compete both with the familiar models and this instance of the PIP. Nevertheless, the current model (including PIP1) is worth focusing on. This is because, though it contains the most concessions to the familiar models, it still creates major difficulties.

I will explain this claim in a moment. But first let us be explicit about the rest of the translation. Suppose we say that PIP1 and PIP2 in the pollution example can be converted to:

(PIP1*) It is collectively rational for most generations to cooperate: (almost) every generation prefers the outcome produced by everyone cooperating over the outcome produced by no one cooperating.

(PIP2*) It is individually rational for all generations not to cooperate: when each generation has the power to decide whether or not it will cooperate, each generation prefers not to cooperate, whatever the others do.

26 Here we might refer again to The Core Example, where it is assumed that for one generation to impose high costs on others merely for the sake of modest benefits for itself is prima facie a serious case of injustice. More specifically, the idea is that if the cooperative outcome is undermined (by PIP2), so that the good acknowledged as collectively rational (in PIP1) is not achieved, something has gone wrong from the point of view of ethics.
What are the implications of this conversion?

Despite its optimism, this version of intergenerational buck-passing is notably worse than the prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons. There are two reasons. The first is that its constituent claims are worse. Consider first the claims about individual rationality. PIP2 is worse than PD2 because the underlying rationale for it is more intractable. PD2 typically arises because there are contingent obstacles to cooperation. For example, the parties in the Prisoner’s Dilemma lack the ability to come together to make a contract, and also the coercive power to enforce any contract that they might make. Hence, PD2 might be rendered false by removing such contingencies. (Cooperation is easy if both are members of the Mafia and their Mafia lawyers tell them that the “family” wishes them to cooperate.) But the reasons for PIP2 are not contingent. If a collective agreement is in the interest of a given group, it is because it does not want to suffer the ill-effects of the activities of its predecessors. But at the point that each generation has the power to cooperate, it is no longer subject to action by its predecessors - by definition, they no longer exist27, and have already either cooperated or not.

Consider now the claims about collective rationality. PIP1 is also much worse than PD1. In PD1, everyone prefers complete cooperation over complete noncooperation. But in PIP1 this is not the case. First, cooperation is not preferred by the first group in the sequence. It is being asked to refrain from noncooperative activities it prefers simply for the sake of future groups. Hence, if it is motivated purely by self-interest or generation-relative concerns, it will not cooperate. Second, this implies that the preference of later groups for cooperation is fragile. Cooperation is preferable for any given group if and only if the groups that precede it also cooperate. But the asymmetrical position of the first group threatens to undermine subsequent cooperation. If the first group does not cooperate, then it makes it the case that the second group has nothing to gain from cooperation, and so (under egoistic or generation-relative motivational assumptions) will itself not cooperate. But then the third group has nothing to gain from cooperation, and so on, for all the other groups in the sequence. In other words, the problem of the first group seems likely to become iterated.28

The second reason that the optimistic version of the PIP is worse than the prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons is that it resists standard solutions. Typical remedies for the prisoner’s dilemma involve appeal to the broad self-interest of the parties, or to some notion of reciprocity. But these solutions do not work for the PIP. For one thing, appeals to broad self-interest characteristically make reference to a wider context of interaction where mutual advantage is possible. But there is no such wider context under the PIP scenario, and mutual benefit is ruled out by the causal circumstances. For another, the possibility of reciprocity is ruled out by the description of the scenario.29

IV. The Features of the PIP

27 We have assumed that each group is temporally distinct.
28 One challenge to the PIP analysis is thus that PIP1 may be too optimistic. Perhaps there is no sense of “collective” rationality here. One reason for this is the undermining effect of iteration just mentioned. Another would be if the time-lag between cause (e.g. emissions) and effect (e.g. climate impacts) is long enough that a number of generations can pass on costs to the future without having to absorb costs from their predecessors. The flexible definition of “generation” under the PIP helps with the second (time-lag) problem. For now, the earlier sequence of asymmetrically powerful groups count as a first generation in this longer-term PIP.
29 These considerations also imply that the PIP is worse than PD in a further way. Historically, the most influential accounts of fairness or justice have relied crucially on the idea of mutual advantage, as providing either the central point of a theory of justice, or at least the best way of modeling fairness. But the PIP resists both forms of analysis. See, for example, Barry 1978, and Gardiner 2009a.
We have established that the PIP is a hard problem, even in its most optimistic varieties.\textsuperscript{30} Still, the conditions for the manifestation of the PIP appear to be stringent. Hence, it is likely to be rarely (if ever) instantiated in a pure form. Nevertheless, the PIP is useful as a paradigm, since the basic structural ideas have force even under some common deviations from the idealized conditions. To show this, and to give a more robust account of the problem itself, I will now analyze its features in a little more detail.

The first feature is temporal asymmetry. The PIP envisages groups of people who can be represented as a sequence of temporally distinct classes. As we have seen, categorization in terms of such groups grounds the use of the term 'generations' in the PIP.

Now, the first feature of the PIP does not yet justify using the language of generations to describe our problems with the future. For, as we have already noted, human beings do not pop into and out of existence in distinct, fully-formed, temporal groups.\textsuperscript{31} Hence, for human situations, we need some other account of group differentiation. This account emerges from the second and third characteristics.

The second feature of the PIP is causal asymmetry. Earlier groups have a power to impose costs on later groups (including severe costs affecting their basic life circumstances), whereas future groups have no causal power over them. Causal asymmetry is the central feature from the point of view of describing the phenomenon as generational: it plays the role of individuating generations, and so makes talk of generations appropriate.\textsuperscript{32} Given this, whether the PIP has any application depends not on whether people come in temporally distinct classes - they clearly do not - but whether there are causal asymmetries of the relevant type between groups in the temporal sequence. Causal asymmetry is the primary notion. For on this account, a generation is a group which has a place in the temporal sequence and which stands in the basic causal relations with predecessors and successors described by the causal asymmetry.

Now, this account of generations has an important implication. For it suggests that the basic problem of fairness persists even if the relevant asymmetries cannot be assigned to rigidly separated groups, but the passage from generation to generation is more fluid. Consider the following. In the pure model, groups have constant membership over time and there is no overlap. But these conditions might be relaxed in various ways without altering much of the central causal structure of the problem. For example, a relevantly similar asymmetric causal relation may hold between groups whose core members remain the same, even if at the margins both add and shed members, in some cases to other groups (as when the older members of the first join the second).\textsuperscript{33} Given this, the problem

\textsuperscript{30} In Gardiner 2009a I argue that it poses a fundamental challenge to some kinds of political theory.

\textsuperscript{31} After writing the paper on which this chapter is based, I came across an article by Tim Mulgan which describes a situation which resembles the PIP in having rigid temporal group differentiation because the beings involved are mayflies. In light of this example, Mulgan proposes a minimal test for political theories. They must justify at least some obligations to future generations in the Mayfly Case. (See Mulgan 2001.) This is in the spirit of the PIP, and suggests that the problem might be relevant to nonhuman political communities with a certain biology even if different biology meant that it could be overcome in the human case. (See also Steiner and Vallentyne 2009.)

\textsuperscript{32} There is also the power to decide whether future generations exist and which individuals will constitute them. I defer discussion of this problem until the final section.

\textsuperscript{33} Initially it might appear that causal asymmetry simply follows from the temporal asymmetry, given the temporal closure of the past. In this case, temporal asymmetry would be the primary theoretical notion. But it is not. For a generation is not just any randomly chosen group from within the temporal sequence. It must satisfy a further criterion. Causal asymmetry provides this criterion.

\textsuperscript{34} There may be other interesting causal asymmetries. Some will count as degenerate cases of the PIP; others will not. But I will leave such questions aside here, since the point of the present paper is not to provide a taxonomy of either intergenerational problems or group dynamics more generally.

\textsuperscript{35} Even a persistence of numerically-identical core members may not be required. In some contexts, the dominance of a given set of ideals or interests may be sufficient to ground talk of a distinct generation. (E.g., in practice we often speak of a 'new generation' or 'second generation' of cars or politicians even when there is no presumption that
of the continuum (mentioned in section I) need not imply that the PIP has no application to the human case.\textsuperscript{36}

The third feature of the PIP is asymmetric independence of interests. Though, of course, later groups have a substantial amount to gain from earlier groups, the reverse is not true: the interests of earlier groups are independent of the interests of groups which succeed them. In particular, on standard assumptions, earlier groups have nothing to gain or lose from the activities or attitudes of later groups (though, of course, later groups have a substantial amount to gain from earlier groups). This feature is important because it rules out any possibility of intertemporal exchange for mutual advantage.\textsuperscript{37}

In the PIP, asymmetric independence of interests is an independently posited feature. But it is tempting to think that this might be unnecessary, because perhaps one can claim that asymmetric independence follows directly from causal asymmetry. Two reasons for this claim spring to mind. First, the main cause of independence is presumably the lack of potential for reciprocity. But this depends on the causal asymmetry: if there can be no causal effects of later on earlier groups, then the later groups are unable to reciprocate in any way. Second, one might think that reciprocation is impossible for a more pragmatic reason: there is nothing that the later groups could give that the earlier could not take in any case.

However, the connection between causal asymmetry and asymmetric independence is less tight than the above account suggests. First, relationships characterized by reciprocity and mutual advantage narrowly conceived are not the only kind possible between different temporal groups. One possibility would be that groups pass on benefits through a scheme of indirect reciprocity - the first benefits the second, the second the third, and so on. Another is that earlier generations pass on benefits as gifts to the future, with the prospect of "receiving" gratitude in return. Neither requires backwards causation. Second, it is not strictly true that there is nothing that later groups can offer which the earlier are not in a position to take. For some goods are time-dependent: they are not available until later, and essentially so. Examples might include the respect or approval of future groups, or the continuation of projects and a group history.

These exceptions to the extent that causal asymmetry implies asymmetric independence are of practical importance. For they imply that asymmetric independence is likely to be false, strictly-speaking, in the real world. Still, it is questionable whether the assumption of asymmetric independence is \textit{substantially} false, in the sense that it simplifies in a way which undermines the point at issue. For what is important for the PIP is that the present interests of the current generation - i.e., those interests that they can secure for themselves by overconsuming - dominate any benefits they might expect to receive from the future and which depend on their not overconsuming. This still seems empirically likely. Hence, a degenerate form of the PIP is likely to have application.\textsuperscript{38} Consider a paradigm case. The benefits to the present generation from energy consumption are likely to be large, secure, tangible and immediate, whereas the benefits from abstaining for the sake of the esteem of future generations are likely to be relatively small, uncertain, intangible and deferred. Furthermore, some benefits of reputation will not depend on the present

---

\textsuperscript{36} See section IV.

\textsuperscript{37} For a detailed analysis of contractarian attempts to deny this, see Gardiner 2009.

\textsuperscript{38} In addition, it is not clear that it would be desirable for things to be different. For example, suppose some course of action could ensure a large and long-lived reputational gain for the present generation. This would likely be only for some correspondingly large project. But this would imply large investment (e.g., in the building of pyramids, a major space program, etc.). We could perhaps devote ourselves to these but it would probably be to the detriment of the welfare of both current and future people. So, it is not obviously desirable. Furthermore, later people might be able to do such things better, and more cheaply, in any case. On a related issue, see Bostrom 2003.
generation not overconsuming. For example, some of the uses of energy consumption might be for cultural or scientific projects which themselves endear the present to the future in some respects.

The fourth feature of the PIP is its motivational assumption. In *The Pure Scenario*, the assumption is that each group has preferences that are predominantly (and perhaps exclusively) concerned with events that happen during the timeframe of its own existence. In other words, it cares primarily about what takes place while it is around, and much less (if at all) about later events. As we have seen in previous chapters, this assumption can be made stronger or weaker for specific purposes, or in response to additional background beliefs. A popular stronger version of the assumption will be that each group is exclusively self-interested; a weaker version is Hume’s claim that although people are not self-interested, they do tend to be much more concerned with those close to them (friends, family, those in their immediate community), than those more distant. It seems plausible to say that the concerns of generational groups will often reflect those connections. A weaker version still (suggested in chapter 2) is that the members of the group are largely motivated by short-term considerations when they make the consumption decisions that drive some serious intergenerational problems. In my view, it is a virtue of the PIP analysis that it allows for a variety of motivational assumptions, and especially that it need not rely on controversial (and probably false) claims about the hegemony of self-interest. In particular, we will want to allow for altruistic and other motives if the PIP is to have a practical solution.

On my preferred interpretation of the PIP, the key problem is that such motives are not adequately registered by current institutions.

The fifth feature of the PIP is that it involves temporally diffuse goods. The focus on such goods is designed to illustrate the problem in its most uncontroversial form. But some deviations from this make little difference to the basic intergenerational issue. Most obviously, generations may have obligations to save current (nondiffuse) goods or resources for future generations. Suppose, for example, that an earlier generation has good reason to believe that a certain mineral deposit or vaccine would be of great use to a particular future generation. Then they may be obliged to preserve a sufficient amount for them. But if their preferences are solely generation-relative, they may fail to live up to this obligation, and so may the intervening generations. (For example, the first ten generations may each take 10% of the amount that should have been saved for the eleventh.)

The final feature of the PIP is its sequential aspect. Its most obvious manifestation comes when the first group in an intergenerational sequence lacks a generation-relative incentive to cooperate, and so does not, with the result that the second group also lacks the incentive, does likewise, and so on. This feature of the PIP can also accommodate deviations. First, buck-passing is a problem even in the absence of iteration. Hence, two generations are sufficient to raise the basic moral issue. Second, groups do not need to be temporally proximate to each other in a continuous sequence for the problem to occur. Instead, buck-passing may “skip” some generations. Imagine, for example, a progression

---

39 We might also say that some overconsumption has little to do with “interests” per se. Arguably, much overconsumption is caused by desires to indulge or amuse, such as relatives show towards children. Indeed, it may be that it is easier to persuade people to give up overconsumption on their own behalf rather than that on behalf of others. I thank Leslie Francis for discussion on this issue.

40 This is not to deny that the PIP would remain a useful analytical tool even under the assumption of egoism.

41 We might note that this could be a severe problem even if the issue arose in only a fraction of relevant cases. Buck passing by the current generation on 10% of serious intergenerational issues might still cause tragedy in the end and serious burdens on the way. I thank Rachel Fredericks for discussion on this point.

42 Paradigm examples of environmental degredation seem to fit the basic pattern of temporally-dispersed goods postulated in the PIP. Climate change caused by anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions is a particularly good example. In climate change, the bad effects of energy consumption on climate stability are largely deferred, since they are extremely long-term, whereas the good effects are immediate and accrue largely to the current generation.
of causally asymmetric groups ABCDEF, each of which is temporally proximate to the previous one. Given the right causal facts, the generational sequence relevant to the PIP may be ACE or ADF, rather than ABCDEF.

V. Applications & Complications

My discussion of the basic features of the PIP and the extent to which they can accommodate deviations has necessarily been preliminary and incomplete. Still, it suffices to show that cases with structures close to the PIP are likely to arise in practice, so that PIP may be a serious problem in the real world. In this section, I will suggest three schematic areas where we might expect to see degenerate forms of the PIP. These areas correspond to three different understandings of the length of a generation.

First, the closest approximations to the pure form of the problem are likely to be found if one adopts the widest definition of future generation mentioned earlier: that future generations are the future people whom those presently alive will not live to meet. Such situations seem to arise in a number of real world cases. One prominent set of examples would be certain long-term implications of climate change. Suppose, for example, that our excessive emissions over the next fifty years set in motion processes that in a thousand years or so cause the sudden release of massive amounts of methane hydrate currently stored under the oceans. Some scientists believe that such a release once caused the biggest extinction of all time, the end of the Permian era 251 million years ago, when ninety percent of species were suddenly lost. Clearly, a change of this kind would be catastrophic. A New York Times columnist aptly referred to it as “the Big Burp Theory of the Apocalypse”. If our generation (on the wide understanding of the term) causes such an apocalypse through reckless activity, then we will have done a grave wrong. Indeed, in my view, this is one of the worse things that we could have done.

Still, most issues usually described as intergenerational do not fit the wide definition. Hence, for the PIP to be central to our problems with future generations it will also have to address narrower definitions of ‘generation’, and so deal with cases of temporal overlap between different groups. The application of the PIP is less clear in situations where there is overlap. Nevertheless, I believe that a degenerate form still persists in such cases.

Let me begin by distinguishing two kinds of overlap. The first is related to a usage of ‘future generations’ mentioned earlier, where future generations are those generations whose members have not yet been born. This use allows for a weak kind of overlap, namely cases where present people will exist at the same time as future people, but those future people are not yet present. The second kind of overlap is stronger. It allows for members of one group to be present alongside members of another when relevant decisions are being made. This corresponds to the use of ‘generation’ to mark the period needed for effective replacement of parents by their children.

The simultaneous physical presence of different generations naturally requires some distinction of groups based on factors other than temporal isolation. But here the PIP model is on firm ground. For the causal asymmetry feature both provides and explains that distinction. First, in the weak overlap case (where members have not yet been born), the present generation retains the strong form of causal asymmetry of the PIP until the first group of future people arrives on the scene. (Then it reverts to the strong overlap case.) Second, even with strong overlap (where members of one group are present alongside members of another when relevant decisions are being made), there is a relevant causal asymmetry. For parents (and adults more generally) retain a strong power over their children until they grow up and achieve some kind of independence. Indeed, this is

---

43 This should be unsurprising, since the wide definition of future people is the one which approximates most closely to the causal asymmetry condition of the PIP.
44 Berner 2002; Barry 2005, 260.
45 Kristof 2006.
presumably what gives the narrower definition of generations its point. "Replacement" means taking on the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, and that requires coming to approximate causal parity.46

So far, then, the PIP seems useful in explaining the degenerate cases. It can distinguish a succession of groups even in overlap cases, and these distinctions are morally relevant. But perhaps we should consider whether the peculiar features of overlap undermine the overall application of the PIP. If it is to do so, this will presumably be through its effects on the relationship between the generations (narrowly conceived). The two main factors here seem to be potential reciprocity and personal attachment, both of which are thought to be impossible in the PIP. Hence, let us briefly consider each of these factors in turn. (I consider the issue in more detail elsewhere.)47

The PIP explicitly rules out the most obvious forms of reciprocity, through the assumption of asymmetric independence of interests, which ensures that earlier generations have nothing to gain from their successors. But this assumption is unlikely to be true in cases of both strong and weak overlap. Given this, for most real world situations it is presumably true that the potential for reciprocity makes some difference, and that this difference increases with the extent of overlap.

Still, we must be careful not to overstate matters. First, many overlapping future people will have limited opportunities to benefit us much: e.g., they will still be too young; we will be too old. (This is especially so in weak overlap cases.) It may also be true that though there is overlap, this is not when the problem is bad, or when complaints can be made. Perhaps we’re harming our grandchildren now, by bringing on an abrupt change that will hit them in 2100. But we have not met our grandchildren yet, they’ll be young when we do, and we’ll be dead by the time the problem arises.

Second, there are at least two kinds of scenarios in these cases, and this makes a difference. In the first, the later group will eventually attain causal symmetry, and then be able to subject the earlier group to reprisals. This would presumably have some effect on the behavior of earlier groups. Still, it is not clear that it would actually pay the later group to withhold cooperation for the sake of past bad treatment once it actually achieves causal parity, when this withholding might damage its interests still further.48 So, the effect may be limited. In the second kind of scenario, the later group may eventually attain a reversed causal asymmetry, where they have the upperhand. Here, earlier groups know that they will eventually be at the mercy of their successors.49 Now, this presumably has some influence when it occurs, and insofar as it does, it may limit the application of the PIP.50 Still, it is doubtful to what extent it characterizes many contemporary relationships between generations. So, the PIP will remain relevant in a range of cases.

Third, important though these factors are, they are limited by the fact that earlier groups can determine many of the circumstances within which the choices of later groups will be made. Manipulation is obviously a concern. But even without this, the general circumstances for later groups will almost necessarily include the fact that at least some of the behavior of earlier towards later generations will have been beneficial. (For example, some nurturing behavior is necessary to their very survival long enough to gain significant

46 Indeed, without this account, it is difficult to grasp either the meaning or the importance of ‘replacement’ as a criterion for generation-individuation.
47 The following discussion is brief and general. It does not consider a number of specific strategies that have been offered, especially within the literature of contractarian political philosophy. I address such strategies in Gardiner 2009 (CFG).
48 It may, of course, pay to pretend earlier on that this is what one will do, in order to extract benefits.
49 The fading of this is, no doubt, one of the reasons why some intergenerational problems are becoming more visible and pronounced. In earlier times the old were extremely dependent on the young. But they are much less so in many countries now.
50 For more, see Gardiner 2009 (CFG).
causal power.) Hence, future groups will necessarily have at least mixed views about their relationship with their predecessors, and so be correspondingly reluctant to take punitive action against them for their transgressions.

In conclusion, then, it seems that by itself reciprocity will not automatically solve the problem. There are many reasons to suspect that actual overlap cases will retain much of the driving structure of the PIP.

The second main complicating feature of overlap is the possibility of personal attachment. The idea here seems to be that attachment can ground strong concern for later generations with the power to override (or modify) self-interest or generation-relative aims. Still, even if this is right, there are several problems in this case. For one thing, the model seems to presume that attachment occurs only on contact; but contact might be a long time coming, and so too late. (If contact is not required, then 'personal attachment' must be carefully distinguished from moral motives which imply direct concern for the future individuals. Such motives must presumably be part of any solution to the PIP and its manifestations.) For another, it is not clear that attachment would give concern with the necessary emphasis on the long-term prospects of the future person, rather than on her short- to medium-term well-being. There is no reason to assume that concern is an all-or-nothing affair. Instead, what seems likely is that it is graduated. On the one hand, we are generally less concerned with those whom we will never meet than with those not yet alive with whom there will be overlap, and less concerned with these than with people currently around. But, on the other hand, even when there is overlap, and we care about the well-being of at least some of the people who remain after we are dead, that concern tends to be less than our concern for individuals around now (even when the same people are at issue) and to decline over temporal distance.

We can conclude that issues of reciprocity and attachment complicate the relevance of the PIP to the human case. However, it is far from clear that they undermine it completely. Rather, they seem to make it clear that the crucial issue with overlapping generations is not when those who will live when we have gone appear, but the extent of our present concern for their well-being. Thus, the PIP remains relevant. Merely to assert that reciprocity and personal attachment are possible does nothing to show that they are actual, that they are present now, or (most importantly) that they are strong enough to overwhelm the competing influence of self-interested or generation-relative concerns.

This point can be made more vivid with a particular kind of example. The relevance of degenerate forms of the PIP is perhaps most stark in one area where there is quite strong overlap. Institutions are often set up so as to produce a temporal sequence of groups with asymmetrical power over others and extremely limited time-horizons. This is especially noticeable with some of the most important institutions, such as national governments and large corporations. Here, the presence of the second factor (extremely limited time-horizons) is obvious. Governments are often focused on their impacts over limited terms of office, particularly as they affect their ability to win the next election; corporations are often focused on the dividends likely to be produced in the immediate years ahead, not the further implications of their actions. But the first factor (asymmetrical power over others) is also present because such institutions are typically headed by elites, who are predominantly people in their mid-forties to mid-sixties. The time horizons during which the impacts of their policies on their institutions or people has significant effects is often much longer than the time they will be around to experience those effects.51 Furthermore, even within these

---

51 A good example of this might be the Canadian ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, which journalists say had more to do with the then-Prime Minister's wish to pose a difficult problem for his successor, a political rival, than any policy conviction: “The internal politics are treacherous. … So why the rush? Why anger the provinces? Why forge ahead without preparation? The simplest explanation is that Chrétien won't be around to implement the protocol. … His heir apparent is his arch-rival and former finance minister, Paul Martin. … He is the one who will have to cope
groups, there is diminishing institutional loyalty, and much moving around. Hence, often what is important is to make a good, highly visible, short-term impact at a given institution, as a way to move on. And this results in an incentive to ignore the long-term impacts of policy.

The relevance of the PIP to institutions with strong overlap is important for a number of reasons. One is that the analysis may have explanatory power in many real world cases. Consider, for example, problems such as the financial deregulation that led to the current global economic crisis, and the attempts at appeasement in the 1930s. Were these caused by buck-passing? At first glance, it seems possible. More importantly, the persistent relevance of the PIP even in such cases shows that its importance is not diminished merely by the observation that human beings do not exist in rigid generational cohorts. We see the threat of intergenerational buck-passing even in settings where there is strong overlap and relatively quick generational turnover. If it can happens there, isn’t it even more likely in less friendly settings, such as the long-term impacts of climate change?

VI. Mitigating Factors

If I am right about the centrality and pervasiveness of the PIP, why has it not been emphasized before? There seem to be two main reasons: first, it has not seemed pressing in practice; second, other significant theoretical problems tend to obscure its presence. In this section, I will briefly address these matters.

1. The Invisible Hand

One possible response to the PIP is to claim that, assuming continued economic growth, people in the future will already be better off than the present generation, so that there is no immediate danger of affecting them for the worse. The basic idea here is that current economic activity tends to result in improved capital stock and infrastructure which are then passed on to the next generation. So, the self-interested consumption behavior of the present generation actually tends to have good results for future people. There is an invisible hand.

There is something to this argument. But we must be cautious about its import. Most importantly for our purposes, it relies on a set of bold empirical claims. The Core Example of the PIP posits temporally-diffuse goods which bring modest benefits for the present generation but impose high costs on future generations. But the invisible hand argument asserts that overall human activities are temporally-diffuse in a different, very beneficial way. They have long-term benefits as well as short-term benefits, and the long-term benefits are persistently larger, so that the future is always better off overall.

with any economic fallout from ratifying Kyoto. … Much of Chrétien's energy in the past few years has been devoted to sticking it to Martin,...”

52 For one thing, it is subject to a number of well-known objections and qualifications. First, it relies on the assumption of continued economic growth. But growth is not an inevitable fact of economic life: human history has not always been characterized by it, nor has the history of particular regions. Hence, it seems likely that there is an invisible hand in this sense only under certain contingent circumstances. So, the PIP is only inoperative, if it is, under some conditions. Second, the argument focuses on narrowly economic benefits. It assumes (a) that there are not long-term noneconomic costs of economic growth (such as environmental costs) which outweigh the gains, or are not compensated for by a larger stock of capital; and (b) that the sole concern for future generations is economic, rather than for, say, stable political or social institutions. Third, evidence about growth itself says nothing about the distribution of wealth. So, we cannot tell, for example, whether the future growth (fortuitously) benefits future people in one part of the world only at the expense of future (or present) people in another part.

53 The argument presumably also assumes that the long-term benefits cannot be converted into short-term benefits for the current generation - otherwise we would need to account for why they do not do so - or that such benefits can be achieved through no specific attention to the PIP problem.
Now, if the empirical claim of the invisible hand argument were true, this would generally be a good thing from the point of view of intergenerational justice. Moreover, if one focuses on the volume of economic goods, there are good reasons to think that it is has been substantially true, at least in the recent history of the more developed nations. Still, we should not get overly carried away by this thought. For it seems unlikely that the empirical claim holds to the degree necessary to undermine the relevance of the PIP.

First, the mere assertion of an invisible hand is not enough to dismiss the PIP. Suppose that at least some goods are temporally diffuse in the PIP sense. On the one hand, it is possible that buck-passing will occur with respect to these goods even if the overall pattern of an earlier generations behavior is beneficial to the future. Perhaps it is just less beneficial than it ought to be; or perhaps the good subject to buck-passing is one to which future generations are separately entitled (e.g., decent air quality or the absence of a highly toxic environment). On the other hand, some goods, such as climate security, may be so important that the presence of buck-passing in these areas has the potential to overwhelm other (and purely economic) gains. A truly catastrophic abrupt climate change, for example, could wipe out decades, or even centuries, of economic growth. This is a serious worry. It suggests that the invisible hand might really be so only from a limited intergenerational perspective. Imagine, for example, that rapid industrialization fueled by fossil fuels produces significant net benefits only for the first ten generations, but is then very costly for those who come after because of its adverse environmental impacts. The invisible hand of economic growth could then turn into the invisible boot of environmental catastrophe.54 This is not an outlandish suggestion; after all, we know that invisible boots are possible. The prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons also point out ways in which they can occur.

Second, even if there is a very strong invisible hand (so that the difficulties just mentioned disappear), the PIP remains relevant. In particular, it seems probable that, to the extent that it is present, the invisible hand operates only under certain advantageous background conditions. In particular, it seems to require a social structure partially constituted by a well-functioning legal and moral framework. But the presence of such a structure hardly characterizes all countries and all periods of the world’s history. Hence, if we favor the invisible hand (and in part because it discharges our intergenerational responsibilities), we presumably have obligations to maintain such a framework. Part of my claim is then that the possibility of the PIP will play a role in explaining the form and import of those obligations. So, again, the PIP analysis is not undercut.

2. Future Uncertainty

The second reason why the PIP tends to be obscured is future uncertainty. In particular, we do not know the technology, the general circumstances, nor the preferences of future people. Now, some writers seem to regard these problems as both definitional of future generations problems and fairly crippling. They also seem to undermine the manifestation of the PIP. If it is impossible to know what will count as a cost in the future, then one cannot see the present generation as generating the relevantly temporally-diffuse goods.

Still, the uncertainty problem seems to me overstated. First, the importance and extent of technological changes is overemphasized. Whilst it is true that the internet, mobile phones and other luxury goods may not even have been conceivable in the late nineteenth century, it is also the case that basic human needs for food, water, shelter and health remain both largely unchanged and under threat in many parts of the world, in ways depressingly reminiscent of earlier centuries. We should not forget that even in the early twenty-first century, billions of the world’s people continue to live in conditions of

54 I take this term from Brennan and Pettit 2004.
subsistence barely removed from those well-known for millennia.\textsuperscript{55} Second, the uncertainty issue is not essentially, or even characteristically generational. We already face large problems with uncertainty with much shorter time horizons (e.g., in our own lives, in assessing what our long-term preferences might be; and in public policy, with the use of biotechnology in agriculture); still, we can and do act. Third, the most worrying problems involving future people – those of large-scale environmental degradation and resource depletion - do not seem to be swamped by uncertainties about future preferences or technologies. For example, it is difficult to believe that the people of 2100 or 2200 will prefer climate instability to stability, or even that they will be in possession of an adequate (and benign) climate stabilization device. More importantly, it seems clear that we would not be justified in basing current inaction on the assumption that they might.

3. Creation

The third complicating issue is that we determine the very existence of future generations. This suggests that the present generation has some control over the obligations it is under. Not only can they control whether there is anyone to have such obligations to, but also the extent of those obligations. For example, if they control the number of future people, they might control which goods really count as temporally-diffuse in the relevant sense. Now, I cannot attempt a full analysis of such complications here. Instead, I will make three brief comments, and then turn to a specific worry posed by the infamous non-identity problem.

Here are the three comments. First, in practice, cases where earlier generations are tempted to manipulate the future in this way are likely to arise only rarely. Consider just two points. On the one hand, at the global level at least, such intervention is likely to be very difficult to achieve. World population, for example, is subject to many complex drivers, few of which are likely to be substantially altered on the kind of time scale likely to be useful to the current generation in manipulating its obligations to the future. As it stands, we have reasonable projections of global population for the next fifty years or so, and a reasonable grasp of the underlying trends. These suggest that world population for the next century or so will be substantially above that of the present. Other things being equal, this would increase our obligations to the future. But it is not clear that there is much that the current generation can do about that. On the other hand, if the current generation wants to manipulate its obligations to the future, it has other, less dramatic means at its disposal. For example, it can try to manipulate the values and preferences of its successors so as to facilitate its own buck-passing. Given the control it has over the upbringing of the next generation, this seems a highly feasible strategy.

Second, in circumstances where there is a threat of manipulation, one salient question is whether the present generation has any obligation to bring a certain number of future people into existence. The PIP analysis attempts no answer to this question. But if the answer is ‘yes’, the PIP might help to explain why either too many or too few people are created.

Third, most creation issues are not specifically generational, and those who believe that they pose large ethical problems nevertheless tend not to think that they undermine our ethical obligations to the future. They will therefore still be concerned about the impact

\textsuperscript{55} These facts tend to be obscured by both (a) the theoretical focus (in economics and elsewhere) on particular preferences, and (b) the fact that we tend to have the preferences of affluent Westerners for luxuries in mind when invoking future generations. Attention to broader sets of preferences (or capabilities) would show more consistency, and make it clear that the main issue is one of realization. What is needed to confront future uncertainty is flexible strategies for discharging obligations to the future. (Ironically, this is one of the strengths of the invisible hand argument, though, of course, that assumes that the future capital stock and infrastructure will be useful to future people. Arguably, it might not be at present, since much of the present world economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels.)
of the PIP on those obligations. With this thought in mind, I turn to a more specific concern involving creation.

4. The Nonidentity Problem (A Brief Aside)

Some people believe that the most important intergenerational problem is what Derek Parfit calls the Nonidentity Problem (NIP). The NIP might seem to threaten the PIP analysis in a specific way. (*This section may safely be skipped by those uninterested in such technicalities.*) Consider Parfit’s classic example, *Depletion*. Parfit imagines an earlier generation contemplating two environmental policies. The first, *Conservation*, increases quality of life for more than 200 years, and then stabilizes at a high level thereafter. The second, *Depletion*, involves a slightly higher increase in quality of life for 200 years, but then makes the subsequent quality of life much lower, though still such that life is worth living. Parfit regards it as obvious that *Depletion* is the worse choice. But he points out that there is a problem with the normal explanation for this, that it harms future people.

The problem can be illustrated as follows. Suppose that the choice between the two policies has dramatic social effects. Imagine, for example, that *Depletion* is akin to “business as usual” and *Conservation* is tantamount to a radical green energy revolution, so that the social infrastructure produced by each policy is very different. As a result, people live, work, and play in very different ways under each policy. Given this, assume that over time the choice will lead people to make different reproductive decisions. They will have children at different times, and perhaps also with different partners, under *Depletion* than under *Conservation*. Suppose also that the identity of a particular child depends crucially on its genetic makeup as determined by the particular sperm and egg from which he or she develops. On this view, even children born to the same parents are different individuals if they emerge from a different sperm and egg. (Children from different parents are of course different.) Hence, the choice of policy will make a difference to which individuals are born. After 300 years or so, Parfit thinks that the difference will be so profound that no individuals who would exist under *Depletion* also exist under *Conservation*, and vice versa. Hence, the two groups are entirely distinct. Call those who exist 300 years into the future under *Conservation*, group A, and those who exist under *Depletion*, group B. Suppose then that *Depletion* is chosen. Is anyone harmed? Parfit argues that they are not. On the one hand, members of group A are not harmed, since they do not come into existence. On the other hand, members of group B are not harmed, since their lives are worth living, and since without *Depletion* they would not have existed at all. So, no one is harmed, and the natural explanation for what is wrong with *Depletion* is defeated.

Parfit goes on to offer an alternative explanation of what is wrong with *Depletion*. But the issue of what to say about the NIP is not our concern here, so I will leave it aside. Our concern is with the threat to the PIP posed by the NIP. The threat is this. Proponents of the NIP may claim that it implies that one of the PIP’s central claims is often false. PIP1 states that it is *collectively rational* for most generations to cooperate. In other words, almost every generation prefers the outcome produced by everyone cooperating over the outcome produced by no one cooperating. But in nonidentity cases, future people who are the “victims” of noncooperation by their predecessors (e.g., group B in *Depletion*) may not prefer the cooperative outcome. After all, they may prefer to exist rather than not exist, given that their lives are still worthwhile.

If PIP1 is false, then the PIP fails to apply. Still, we should not be too quick to assume that the analysis is in real trouble. There are three reasons. First, nonidentity cases are only a subset of those to which the PIP might be applied. So, the relevance of the PIP does not stand or fall with what is said about such cases. For identity cases, where the

---

56 See Parfit 1986. This is not the only nonidentity case that he considers, but it is the one most relevant to climate change.
generation produced by noncooperation is the same as that produced by cooperation, PIP1 holds.

Second, if the PIP fails for nonidentity cases, notice that it fails in an interesting way. The claim that vanishes is the one that implies that noncooperation is a moral or prudential problem. Thus, if it defeats the PIP, then the NIP seems to justify what initially seems problematic (as it also does in the case of Depletion). If we retain the sense that something has gone wrong in such cases, we may be more inclined to resist the NIP than the PIP.

Third, in any case, it is not clear that the NIP does undermine the PIP. Although I cannot give a full response here, a few brief remarks may be helpful. The complaint against the PIP rests on the idea that in nonidentity cases some prefer to exist under noncooperation rather than not to exist at all. The problem is with group B. Under the NIP, the claim is that B will prefer noncooperation, since their existence depends on it. Hence, group B appear to undermine PIP1. But matters here are more complicated than they first seem.

To begin with, even if group B would prefer noncooperation, group A would prefer restricting pollution, since it allows them to come into existence in a situation where there is no unfairness to them. Hence, group A do not dissent from PIP1. This is not enough to make PIP1 true – since the claim requires a strong consensus - but it does complicate the picture.

In particular, since PIP1 actually refers to the preferences of generations, the dispute between A and B brings into focus the issue of what is to count as a distinct generation. Are A and B considered together (perhaps with others) a generation? Or does each count as a separate generation? The nonidentity-based objection to PIP1 looks best of one assumes that they are separate. If B is a distinct generation, then PIP1 might be straightforwardly false. But is B a distinct generation? Arguably, it is not, and the PIP analysis itself gives strong grounds for saying so. Suppose that a generation is a group that occupies a specific temporal period and is in a given causal relationship to its predecessors and successors, as the PIP suggests. This seems to yield an account of a generation as (roughly) those who might be alive at time t, and are affected by the decisions of the present generation. But this includes both group A and group B.

If the morally-relevant “generation” includes A and B, then it seems that we need a way of forming a joint attitude, of that generation toward PIP1. It is not clear how one is to do this. But we can make two important observations. First, the fact that it needs to be done suggests that it is not obvious that the NIP casts doubt on PIP1. Second, there seem to be some possible ways of forming the joint attitude that favor PIP1. Consider the following example. Suppose that one is sympathetic to Rawlsian accounts of fairness. Then, the relevant question to ask B (and A) might be whether they would prefer noncooperation from behind an appropriate veil of ignorance where they do not know who they will be or which policy is to be chosen. But if this is the question, then PIP1 looks more appealing. Intuitively, possible members of a later generation whose actual constitution will be determined by the choice between Depletion or Conservation, but who don’t know whether they will exist or not, would have strong reason to choose Conservation. If so, PIP1 may be true for that “generation”.

Now, I want to be careful about the point I’m making here. I am not claiming that Rawls’s own approach succeeds; indeed, I am implicitly invoking a distinct model. Nor do I claim to have shown that my invocation of this model ultimately resolves the nonidentity problem. (Though something like it might, these are matters for another occasion.)

---

57 Having to do it does not itself resolve the question either for or against (PIP1). We already know that, taken independently, A accept, and (by hypothesis at this point) B dissent.

58 For some doubts about Rawls’ approach, see Gardiner 2009 (CFG) and Gardiner forthcoming (RGT).

59 These points were originally made in Gardiner 2003, footnote 10. Some more recent discussions of the nonidentity problem seem to be in a similar spirit (e.g., Reiman 2007; Kumar 2003; see also Woodward 1986).
current purposes, the crucial point is merely that the PIP need not be undermined by the NIP. There is logical space through which it may escape its clutches.

In conclusion, in this brief aside I have considered the claim that the pure intergenerational problem is undermined by another intergenerational problem, the nonidentity problem. I have argued that it is not. First, not all intergenerational cases are ones of nonidentity. Second, if there is a conflict between the PIP and the NIP, it is not clear that we should preserve the NIP. Third, the sense of “generation” underwritten by the PIP is not obviously vulnerable to nonidentity objections, and may even provide the beginnings of a response to such objections.

VIII. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for five main claims. First, there is a core moral problem – the problem of intergenerational buck-passing - that constitutes the central challenge of distinctively intergenerational ethics, and so deserves the label “the pure intergenerational problem”. Second, this problem can accommodate and justify the standard variations in our usage of the language of “generations”. Third, it is not overwhelmed by the presence of other difficulties often thought of as distinctively intergenerational. Fourth, the problem can manifest itself in a variety of impure forms in the real world, including in some of our most serious environmental problems, such as climate change. Fifth, the problem has an especially challenging structure, and one that makes it more resistant to solution than similar problems, such as the prisoner’s dilemma and tragedy of the commons.

The PIP is clearly a difficult problem to solve. But we should not be downcast. The aim of this analysis is not to undermine ethical behavior towards the future, nor to show that it is impossible. Rather, the hope is that the identification of the pure intergenerational problem will motivate further theoretical investigation of our obligations to future people, and warn us that in practice present generations are vulnerable to corruption, in virtue of their asymmetric causal power and time-dependent interests.

More generally, intergenerational ethics poses a multitude of philosophical puzzles. Indeed, this is so much so that John Rawls, the most influential moral and political philosopher of the twentieth century, said that intergenerational justice in particular “subjects any ethical theory to severe if not impossible tests”. Still, the central problem of vulnerability captured by the PIP is easy to grasp, even if the nature and extent of the challenge it poses has not yet been adequately appreciated. Moreover, this is a case where a good diagnosis may contribute substantially to a cure. Understanding that one is engaging in intergenerational buck-passing is morally uncomfortable. As Rawls himself says: “It does not follow [from the severity of the theoretical problems] ... that certain significant ethical constraints cannot be formulated. ... it may often be clear that a suggested answer is mistaken even if an alternative doctrine is not ready to hand.”

60 Rawls 1999 (RTJ), 251.
61 253, Rawls, 1999 (RTJ)