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A Care Ethical Defense of Intergenerational Obligations

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A CARE ETHICAL DEFENSE OF INTERGENERATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that an ethic of care can justify an obligation or set of obligations to future generations. To do this, I analyze a comparable project by Thomas Randall and while ultimately agreeing with his basic conclusion, I show that he needlessly rejects arguments that would help to establish this obligation. Specifically, I defend against his critiques of Nel Noddings and Anca Gheaus. From here, I move on to show that an ethic of care centered on needs is more effective for making policy decisions than the sufficientarian model established by Randall.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The field of intergenerational ethics addresses questions surrounding what we owe to the people who will come after us. Some of these questions include whether we have any obligations to these people at all, and if we do, how far they extend, whether we can be held responsible for harms that our descendants suffer due to policies we enact, and which resources we ought to protect and conserve. One project for those who believe we do have obligations to future generations concerns how we justify these obligations. Care ethicists tend to focus on close, personal relationships, and argue that our obligations are stronger, or even only arise, within the context of these relationships. Of course, we will never interact with a large swathe of the people who come after us and so assessing the nature of our obligation to them can be difficult.

Thomas Randall[1] examines a few of these problems and concludes that caring for those around us requires us to ensure that caring relations are possible in the future. Following psychologist Samuel Scheffler,[2] Randall argues that the present generation often values things explicitly because they know that future generations will inherit and benefit from them. For example, doctors often work their entire lives developing treatments that they might never see

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[1] Thomas Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations," *Hypatia* 34, no. 3 (2019.)

[2] Samuel Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife" (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2013.)

come to fruition, hoping that some future generation will benefit. Were there to be no future persons, they might abandon these projects and lose a sense of purpose. We rightly assume that those in the future will not have radically different needs than we do and that they will flourish in similar ways. [3]When we engage in future aiming projects we are making an attempt to care for them. Those in the present generation depend heavily on these attempts to provide care in order to ensure meaning in their own lives and, if we are to care for those around us, a critical part of that includes ensuring that future generations can do the same. For Randall this means that "people in the present ought to ensure the conditions needed to encourage and sustain a world that enables good caring relations to flourish."[4]

While I agree with Randall's conclusion, he unnecessarily undercuts valuable arguments that actually further justify and define our obligations to the future. These include the works of Nel Noddings and Anca Gheaus, which are both stronger than he gives them credit for, and are actually compatible with his overall argument. I advance that this reassessment bolsters the justification for care ethicists to assert that we have obligations towards future generations and a provides a framework by which we can understand what those obligations are.

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[3] For a similar position, consider Bryan Norton's concept of protectionism.
Bryan Norton. *Searching for Sustainability Interdisciplinary Essays in the Philosophy of Conservation Biology*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 436.

[4] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations" 528.

CHAPTER II

DEFINING AN ETHIC OF CARE AND KEY CONCEPTS

Systems of care ethics are broad and diverse, making singular definitions of the family of theories difficult. In this paper, I define an ethic of care broadly as an ethic that seeks to create, perpetuate, and strengthen caring relations. Caring relations are best described as a series of encounters between two or more parties in which care is expressed. One expresses care towards another by helping them to meet some need that they typically cannot meet on their own. While care may be expressed in singular encounters, such as when one saves another from drowning, caring relations are best characterized by expressions of care that are sustained over time, and in which the quality of the care is improved upon and reinforced.

Now we can move on to identify needs. While many recognize that we as a species have universal biological needs such as sustenance and shelter, care ethicists tend to recognize an expanded set of needs. Nel Noddings and Daniel Engster broadly agree that there is a need for practical and moral education, a need for affiliation including affection and group membership, and a need to express care by helping others to meet these same needs. I will focus on Noddings' three main categories of preservation, growth, and acceptability[5] as points of agreement with Engster.

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[5] Nel Noddings. *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002), 62.

Preservation needs are those basic biological ones already mentioned and Engster expands our understanding. He states: "When we care for individuals we most basically help them to satisfy their vital biological needs… Vital biological needs include access to adequate food, sanitary water, appropriate clothing and shelter, sufficient rest, a clean environment, basic medical care, and protection from harm."[6]

The next need on the list is that of growth. For Noddings, growth is not exclusively biological but encompasses emotional, intellectual, and social development. This context frames the need for growth as a need for things like education, moral development, play, and creativity. We teach children to avoid doing harm to others, act fairly, and help others. Additionally, we equip them with the skills necessary to navigate life by teaching them mathematics, reading and writing, civics, scientific literacy, history, and a variety of other subjects. Engster agrees that development, or growth, is "necessary for social functioning, where social functioning means being able to work and obtain the resources necessary for survival, being able to care for oneself and others, and having the opportunity to pursue some conception of the good life."[7] He cites mathematics and literacy as basic capabilities, suggesting that we all require conceptual education, in addition to more skill based education.

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[6] Daniel Engster. The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

[7] Engster, The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory, 26-27.

Noddings' third category of needs is comprised of two parts which are related to acceptability. The first concerns being a member of a community. Noddings argues extensively that we are interdependent and have a desire for affiliation or association. It is not enough for us to simply have our basic needs met, but we must also feel as though we are playing an important role within our relational network. The second concerns being socially and culturally acceptable. We have both a need for affiliation, and at the same time, a need to be worthy of affiliation.[8] For instance, we learn basic manners at an early age and throughout one's time in school, much of the time is dedicated to learning how to appropriately interact with others. Part of being worthy of affiliation also means that we have a need to contribute to the relational networks of which we are a part. Essentially, we have a need to express care.

[8] Engster's focus on the needs of adults, particularly in the political realm, illustrates how affiliation takes different forms across the lifespan. While adults may be less likely than children to require help attaining certain types of acceptability, they may in fact be more likely to need help attaining other types. For instance, as one ages they typically find that they have the desire to become more enmeshed in the social functioning of their local communities in a way that children may not even be able to comprehend.

CHAPTER III

RANDALL'S OBJECTIONS TO NODDINGS

Randall's first argument is that Nel Noddings' conception of care seems unable to assert any obligation to future generations beyond those with whom we have direct contact. To see why, we must first get a better understanding of how Noddings views caring encounters. As previously noted, one expresses care during a caring encounter by helping another party to meet some need that they cannot meet on their own. However, a caring encounter is better when it follows a specific procedure of care. For Noddings this procedure is as follows: "(A, B) is a caring relation if and only if: 1. A cares for B —that is, A's consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational displacement. 2. A performs some act in accordance with 1. and, 3. B recognizes that A cares for B."[9] Attention, or 'engrossment' as Noddings typically calls it, has two key features. First, it requires detailed knowledge of the life of the other. In order to accurately and effectively respond to the other's needs, one must understand the background context of the situation at hand. Second, engrossment requires an awareness of the emotional state of the other. To understand the needs of the other, one must be present and focused on them. Motivational displacement is best contrasted with empathy. Empathy for Noddings may best be characterized by the colloquial phrase 'put oneself in another's shoes.' When one is empathetic, they project themselves and their desires and interests onto the other and think about

[9] Noddings, Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy, 19.

what *they* would want in the given situation. When one exercises motivational displacement, they instead *feel with* the other, and attempt to understand the desires of the other, rather than what their own desires would be. Noddings' third step is also important to understand because Randall argues against it as well. When the party receiving care has their need met or when steps are being taken to meet that need, they must in some way acknowledge what is happening or what has happened. This can be as simple as a baby ceasing to cry when given food, or something such as a thank you note to the person expressing care. For Noddings, if some sort of acknowledgement is not made, the caring encounter is rendered incomplete.

Randall believes that requiring motivational displacement and engrossment for caring encounters to be complete automatically rules out the possibility of establishing an obligation to future generations, because (1) those who do not exist yet do not have motives yet, (2) we cannot know what they will want, (3) there is no background context to pay attention to, and (4) the ability to feel-with anyone is lacking. These parts of the caring encounter simply cannot occur without a living person that can be interacted with directly. Similarly, the acknowledgement step renders completion of the caring encounter impossible because we will not be around for future generations far enough out to recognize us. If we justify sustainable practices by suggesting that we are attempting to care for those who will live a hundred years from now, it will be impossible for those living at that time to recognize us directly.

Those who have read Noddings carefully may want to pause here. She distinguishes between two types of care and so far what we have described only covers the first. This first type

is called ‘caring-for’ and it is a direct, face-to-face expression of care. The second type is called ‘caring-about,’ and occurs when one acknowledges that another is in need but cannot themselves meet this need directly. Noddings believes that caring-about will always be a poor substitute for caring-for but she does stress its importance.[10] Caring-about is most effective when it motivates us to enable others capable of caring-for to do so. This form of caring seems much more analogous to the type of relation that intergenerational ethics requires. If we care-about future generations, we might leave them a world with conditions necessary to enable caring-for when they exist. However, Randall still sees a problem. He interprets Noddings as holding caring-about to be supererogatory. Under this interpretation, we have no obligation to care-about future generations and it is logically impossible to care-for them. If he is right, Noddings simply cannot argue that we have any obligation to the future.

[10] Noddings, Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy, 23-24.

CHAPTER IV

IN DEFENSE OF NODDINGS

It is my argument that motivational displacement and engrossment with future generations are in fact possible by showing that Noddings structures the caring encounter to apply to all forms of care and that caring-about is not supererogetory. Noddings' entire project starts by asking what the best homes[11] do as a model for providing care. While she does not discuss it directly, we should consider how parents in the best homes plan for children in at least four ways. First, decisions are made between potential parents regarding whether children will be conceived and how many. Second, parents plan specific ways to meet the immediate material needs of their child by purchasing supplies such as diapers, food, toys, and cribs far in advance. Third, they plan ways to meet the extended long-term needs of their future child. Those who can afford it will start college funds, consider school districts and the safety of given neighborhoods, and take out life insurance policies. Finally, parents establish networks of care by arranging home and child care or by selecting godparents as safeguards against future tragedy. These examples are not merely common parental behaviors; rather, parents who do not engage in these

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[11] I am borrowing this phrasing from Noddings. She argues that her starting position might be best contrasted with Plato who asks what the ideal state is and then discusses how homes and families should reflect this. She asks "What might we learn if, instead, we start with a description of the best homes and then move outward to society?"
Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*, 1.

types of behaviors fail to meet their obligations to their child. The best parents express care for their child before their child is conceived, and likely even before the decision has been made.[12]

Given that much of this planning demonstrates care and may occur before a child is conceived, I argue that engrossment and motivational displacement can and should also be applicable to those who do not yet exist. We can find support for this interpretation in Noddings' concept of inferred needs: "Inferred needs are not initially expressed by the one in need. Few children express a need for schooling, but once exposed to it they may express a need for further schooling. Of course, the opposite may happen. Children may... After exposure, decide they want nothing more to do with schools. In such unhappy cases the need remains inferred."[13] Certain needs are fundamental and basic. We can infer that people will have these needs even if we do not know them, or, as in the case of children, they protest. Motivational displacement and engrossment are merely the ways in which these needs are managed and how we improve the quality of care. They allow us to better apply care within the context of specific instances of care. Therefore, we need not have specific knowledge about the needs of a person who does not yet exist in order to express care for them. We can infer what their fundamental needs will be, and have a flexible plan to provide for them. Noddings may seem to contradict this position later on

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[12] For another take on this type of planned care, one can turn to Annette Baier who argues that teachers are obligated to consider the needs of students who they do not yet know.
Annette Baier. "The right to parent and duties concerning future generations" *Reflections on How We Live*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2010.)

[13] Noddings, Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy, 19.

in the same page: “Carers need to know something about the individuals or groups to whom they are responding. They need information about the internal conditions– the sufferings, longings, and fears of those who need care– as well as external conditions.”[14] However, this quotation is in response to cases of inappropriate care for specific needs. Providing blankets to a hungry person does not meet their needs. Giving a cold but well-fed person more food does not help them either. General needs are typically universal and consistent across persons. Consequently, engrossment and motivational displacement have a lower bar to clear when we are thinking about our future children because we can make inferences about general and fundamental needs. If we can express motivational displacement and engrossment towards children who do not yet exist, then, there is no reason to believe this is impossible for those even further in the future.

Contrary to Randall’s claims, Noddings’ acknowledgement step is also possible to complete with future generations. Although Noddings argues that acknowledgement is some form of detectable response by the cared-for to the one expressing care, acknowledgement is not limited to direct practice. Acknowledgement can be completed by indirect action, and need not be immediate.

First, consider the importance of the acknowledgement step, and the purpose Noddings assigns it within the caring encounter: “[Acknowledgements] are the means by which A monitors her efforts, and they provide the intrinsic reward of caring.”[15] and “It merely suggests some form

[14] ibid.

[15] ibid.

of response that will be detectable by A. Reception of A's caring by B completes the relation."[16] This suggests that acknowledgement is a barometer for effective care, and that one can gain knowledge of effective care through indirect actions. If one were to leave a large sum of money to a local school upon death, the future recipients will not be able to react directly to the deceased patron. However, we would likely still call this a completed caring encounter if assurances were made that these funds would be put to proper use. If this were to happen, the donor can be confident that their attempt at care was successful.

Second, acknowledgement need not occur immediately following an expression of care. For instance, when a parent insists that their child attend school, that insistence may not be met with any positive response in the moment. It may not be met for this instance at all. Years down the line, the child may thank their parents for sending them to school even when they did not want to attend, but these particular encounters will likely be forgotten. In fact, sending one's child to school may never elicit a specific acknowledgement. A strong relationship later in life and a well-educated, successful child may be enough. When one genuinely celebrates their parents on holidays or other occasions this likely completes the encounter or works towards that end. If an immediate response were required for an act to be considered care, very few encounters could ever be called caring.

Having demonstrated that acknowledgement is more flexible than Randall claims and does allow for the completion of a caring encounter in the future, we can next respond to his

[16] ibid.

charge that caring-about is supererogatory. There are two quotes by Noddings that Randall primarily relies on to charge that caring-about is supererogatory: "I am not obliged to care for starving children in Africa, because there is no way for this caring to be completed in the other unless I abandon the caring to which I am obligated"[17] and "Caring-about [is] a poor second-cousin to caring."[18] The first quote is a claim about one obligation superseding another, not a claim of supererogation. She is already embedded in a network of caring relations which strongly obligate her to provide care and has no prior relationship with the children of Africa. This quote does not exclude an obligation to express care towards the children of Africa were there to be no conflict with stronger obligations. Turning now to the second Noddings quote referenced by Randall, it is correct that caring-for others is superior to caring-about them, but this does not mean that caring-about is supererogetory. In fact, in a recent book on care ethics, Noddings says: "The basic distinction between caring-for and caring-about remains important, but I now think caring-about deserves much more attention. Indeed, caring-about may provide the link between caring and justice."[19] Interpreting caring-about as supererogertory, rather than a necessary version of care that is preceded by caring-for, would be contradictory to Noddings' recent published work.

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[17] Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education, 2nd Ed.* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995) 15.

[18] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984) 97.

[19] Noddings, Starting at Home Caring and Social Policy, 22.

With all this in mind, Noddings' positions do not exclude obligations to future generations. Further, if care is interpreted correctly, we should be able to complete caring encounters with those in the future. These encounters cannot be direct as we cannot care-for those distant from us in time, but we can care-about them by facilitating others to better care-for those around them. Despite misunderstanding her, Randall comes to the same conclusion as Noddings: "People in the present ought to ensure the conditions needed to encourage and sustain a world that enables good caring relations to flourish."[20] Consequently, care ethics can support obligations to future generations.

[20] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations" 528.

CHAPTER V

RANDALL'S OBJECTIONS TO GHEAUS

Randall also critiques what he calls the overlapping generations argument. He cites Anca Gheaus as giving the first formulation of this argument, and his interpretation of it is critical to read directly.

> "Gheaus's argument, in brief, is this: If each child has a right to adequate life prospects, and if adequate life prospects require enough resources to raise children justly, then adults (if they are adequate parents) have a right to rear with enough resources to justly raise their children. Given that generations will continue overlapping indefinitely into the future, the argument simply repeats."[21]

Care ethicists tend to avoid rights-based arguments but Randall sees a possible analogue. Parents clearly have an obligation to conserve enough resources to care for their children who in turn have an obligation to do the same for the next generation and so on. Localizing our obligation only one generation ahead should sidestep the problem of justifying any obligations we would have into the far future. If each generation conserves enough for the next, society should theoretically be able to continue on indefinitely and we would no longer need to think so far ahead. As Randall is quick to point out, there are a few big issues with this analogous argument. First, those without children may not have any obligation to conserve resources for the next

[21] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations." 531.

generation. Second, short-term resource management is an insufficient limitation for long-term resource consumption. The obligation of the first generation to the succeeding generation does not impose a strong enough or expansive enough limit to ensure that it leaves sufficient resources for the third generation. This is hardly an adequate justification for an intergenerational ethic if we want to assert that we do have obligations to distant peoples.

CHAPTER VI

IN DEFENSE OF GHEAUS

While Randall misunderstands Noddings, he badly misinterprets Gheaus by summarizing only a small part of her argument. Gheaus primarily argues that there is a fundamental right to parent if one can do so adequately.[22] Gheaus sees parenting nearly as a species activity that has unique benefits for both the child and the parent. Here she imports the argument of Brighouse and Swift, who argue that the relationship between parents and children imposes a unique moral burden due to power asymmetries that is different from the obligations imposed by relationships between adults. Children are fully dependent and do not have the power to leave the relationship. Additionally, the type of intimacy provided by the child is spontaneous and unconditional but parents have a responsibility to be far more careful in how they express their intimacy, and how they respond to their child. These moral burdens also come with unique benefits. First, there is the pleasure of seeing the world through the eyes of the child, as well as the pride that comes from helping a child to succeed. Additionally, the obligation that parents have towards their children to help them develop allows the parent "to learn more about herself, she comes to develop as a person, and she derives satisfactions that otherwise would be unavailable."[23]

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[22] Anca Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Volume 24, no. 4, (2016).

[23] Brighouse, Harry and Adam Swift. "Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family." *Ethics* 117, no. 1 (2006): 95.

Brighouse and Swift suggest that no other type of relationship has all of these same features and that these features are a requirement for flourishing for most people. This expanded analysis bolsters the argument that parents have a right to adequate resources for the task. For Gheaus, parents have these rights for their own benefit as well, not merely as proxy via their children's rights as Randall claims. Gheaus is actually arguing that well-being is in some way intimately tied up with the ability to parent children for many people. If one cannot access the resources necessary to parent effectively, their own flourishing is also impeded.

In the next step of her argument, Gheaus suggests that it is wrong to force someone to choose between sacrificing their own rights and passing this sacrifice onto another. Thus, we wrong our children if we leave them in a world in which they must choose between sacrificing their right to parent, or passing this sacrifice to generations down the line. She argues that the right to parent also implies a right to the resources necessary to parent adequately. If the next generation or some generation down the line cannot obtain these resources because of decisions that we have made, then they will be forced to sacrifice their right to parent, and we will have wronged them. This causes her argument to continue ad infinitum. Note that Randall seems to believe that for Gheaus, parents only ought to conserve resources so that they may guarantee the survival and a minimal standard of well-being for their child. However, Gheaus actually argues that parents must conserve enough resources so that their children can justly rear children of their own, along with every subsequent generation.

CHAPTER VII

BUILDING FURTHER

Let us move on to building on the work of Gheaus and Noddings. Gheaus can help us to see how far our obligations extend, while Noddings' views on needs can help us to sort out what type of world we ought to leave behind.

While the language of rights does not fit cleanly into an argument for care ethics, we can offer an argument more analogous to that of Gheaus than the one Randall provides. I assert no right to parent. However, I grant that parenting is tied closely to the well-being of many individuals. As mentioned previously, care ethicists typically emphasize that we have a need to express care for those around us which means that our well-being is in part dependent upon our ability to express care. This obligates us to leave a world to our children that will allow them to sufficiently care for those around them as well because failing to do so would be a breach of our own care. Caring for others simply means that we must leave them capable of expressing care as well. Those whom our children will care for will inevitably include their children and we owe them a world where this is possible. One might pause here and suggest that while we do have a need to care for those around us, we do not necessarily have a need to produce children. While I am skeptical that this is true for a large portion of the human population, defending the need to have children is not within the scope of this paper. Rather, so long as it is morally permissible to

reproduce,[24] and we can expect that our children will continue to have children of their own, we also have an obligation and need to leave a world in which it is possible for our children to properly care for theirs. This should extend ad infinitum into the future like Gheaus' argument.

Much like Randall, I advocate for a sufficientarian model of distributive justice. That is to say that there is a minimum threshold of wellbeing that a society must provide to its members to have fulfilled its political obligation to them. For Randall, this threshold is quite high. "This forms a sufficiency threshold: we must create the conditions for all persons to be embedded in good caring relations."[25] By this, he means that we have an obligation to all persons currently living to ensure that they can engage in good caring relations. Additionally, because he thinks that we have an obligation to those who are not yet living, we must also create the conditions that make good caring relations possible for them as well. In essence, "the present generation ought to ensure the conditions that enable good caring relations to flourish for posterity."[26] For Randall, the conditions that enable caring relations to flourish are the ones that promote certain values which include attentiveness, mutual concern, responsiveness, and trustworthiness.[27] While these values may indeed partially characterize good caring relations, I argue that they do not do so fully. Randall's wording is far too strong. If it is necessary that all persons be engaged in

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[24] David Benatar argues that it isn't, however rejecting this argument goes beyond the scope of this paper. David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Clarendon Press, Oct 12, 2006)

[25] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations." 542.

[26] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations." 548.

[27] Randall, "Care Ethics and Obligations to Future Generations." 543.

relationships characterized by trust, attentiveness, and etc, it may be impossible for us to fulfill our obligations. It is likely that there will always be people engaged exclusively in unhealthy relationships, no matter the political and economic structure. The goal should be to minimize this, as elimination seems infeasible. However, even if we weaken the threshold, there are still issues. While Randall does note that we will need to use resources to achieve the outcome we're aiming at, his lack of focus on the fulfillment of specific needs within these relationships leaves the path forward vague and unhelpful. In fact, if these values are the only measure of a good caring relation, it is likely that we already live in a world close to meeting the sufficiency threshold. It seems quite possible for a relationship to be marked by all of the values for which Randall advocates, even in a crisis. For instance, trust between a mother and child is still possible in a famine and in some cases these tragic situations may even strengthen bonds. It is because of this that I argue caring relations can only flourish when it is possible for carers to meet the needs of those for whom they care. We must ensure that we leave enough resources for future generations to feed themselves, drink clean water, breathe clean air, and meet all the other universal needs discussed earlier. If we utilize an ethic of care centered on responding to needs, as I have laid out in this paper, we are able to be much more specific about what type of world we ought to leave.

Before going further, it is important to note a few strengths of the sufficientarian model. Economist Robert Solow argues that "[sustainability] is an obligation to conduct

ourselves so that we leave to the future the option or capacity to be as well off as we are."[28] For Solow, wellbeing is defined as the ability to consume. As long as the next generation can consume at a rate similar to us, we have fulfilled our obligation. There are many problems with this. Solow seems to assume that humanity is currently a monolith. People around the world do not consume at the same rate, some consume much more than they need to care adequately for those around them, while others do not have enough to do so. The idea that we are obligated to leave the next generation as capable of consumption and production as we are is simply nonsense. In stark contrast, the sufficientarian model would suggest that present economic inequity is a deep violation of our moral obligations. It is likely necessary that some in the present generation will need to limit their consumption so that others can effectively meet the minimum threshold of needs satisfaction. Similarly, our obligation to leave a world in which caring relations can flourish means that we must recognize that there is a minimum standard of care that we must leave future generations capable of. We are obligated to consume at least enough resources to adequately care for those around us, but also not to over consume to the point that we prevent future generations from doing the same.

Because my argument suggests that our obligations extend infinitely into the future, we are left with a few problems. There are two that I think are particularly pressing, but they also help reveal the strengths of my argument. First, we are epistemically limited in our ability to

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[28] "Robert Solow. "Sustainability: An Economist's Perspective," Economics of the Environment (4th EDN) (New York, New York, 2017), 143.

predict the future, especially the further forward we go. Second, it is essential to know when it is permissible to consume limited resources.

We are highly limited in what we can predict will happen, even in the not-too-distant future. Those who initially began burning coal for fuel did not and likely could not know about the greenhouse effect. We cannot know what future technology will make possible for us, nor every consequence of policies we put into place. Because ought implies can, our obligations weaken with time. While they may seem to stretch into infinity, we can avoid decision paralysis because we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of actions that we cannot reasonably predict. So long as we attempt to implement policies that will ensure the ability of all to have their needs met based on the information we have now, we meet our obligation. There are a few interesting rules that fall out from this. First, we are obligated to make predictions about and monitor the effects of our current care practices. We must seek alternatives to these practices if we find that they may hamper the flourishing of caring relations in the future. Additionally, we must not leave the future of caring relations up to chance. We should be hesitant to think that future generations will be able to solve problems that we ourselves have no solutions to. In essence, we cannot shift responsibilities forward on the off chance that the future will be better equipped to handle them. The goal is to provide a stable and long term ability for all to meet their needs.

It is simply a fact that some resources are limited, and our need or desire to utilize these resources poses unique moral challenges to intergenerational ethics. For instance when, if

ever, is it ever permissible to completely deplete an oil field to use it for such things as power generation and the creation of plastics? I argue that care ethics provides at least three guidelines for thinking through this problem.

First, caring relations must still be able to flourish for the foreseeable future when resources are consumed. If the consumption of any given resource would leave those in the future incapable of meeting their needs, it is impermissible so long as there are alternatives. In the case of genuine tradeoffs in which the present generation can only meet its basic needs by discounting the future, the case is less clear, though articulating what ought to be done is beyond the scope of this paper. To illustrate this rule, consider a simplified version of air pollution. While clean air is not a resource that we actively provide to one another to help each other breathe, it is one that our actions can have an effect on. When we pollute, we lessen the abilities of others to meet their need to breathe. Care ethics would suggest that it is impermissible to pollute the air for short term gains in preference satisfaction. Of course, we pollute the air for reasons far more complex and pressing than the production of luxury goods. However, as a basic tenet, because pollution affects our abilities to meet our needs we should minimize our production practices that lead to it. This means that care ethics can prescribe us to use clean energy over hydrocarbons whenever possible, urge the promotion of public transit over the production of private vehicles, and much more. In essence, it is impermissible to use resources if it would discount the ability of future generations to meet their needs when there are alternatives to these resources that would not result in this effect.

Second, care theorists argue that there are adequate and inadequate standards of care, and while changes over time in lifestyle, technology, and the capacity to care are inevitable, we cannot rely on future generations to adapt perfectly and live adequately in any condition that we might leave the world they will inherit in. We cannot rely on the invention of technologies in the future that solve problems that we have left behind. For instance, a care ethicist should reject the idea that while carbon capture technologies may not be adequate now to stem air pollution, with more time they will get better and undo any damage that we have done. If any consumptive pattern goes beyond the threshold of providing an adequate lifestyle and threatens the ability of future generations to meet that threshold it is impermissible even if this threat is minimal or might be somehow overcome. With this in mind, it is best to leave a world in which it is possible for future generations to meet the sufficiently adequate standard of care for as far as we can confidently predict and only consume resources in quantities that we are confident will not hamper this ability. Following from this, we should be careful not to over consume renewable resources past their maximum sustainable yield. Additionally, economists such as Solow have claimed that all resources can be substituted for. For instance, while we may overfish and end up destroying the salmon population, we should not worry because future generations will find some other fish, or equivalent food resource to eat. The switch to kerosene was made only when whale oil became unviable for use, but it fulfilled the same consumptive niche. I am skeptical of these examples. Simply because some resources are in fact substitutable, does not mean all are. It would be wrong to suggest that every consumptive niche can be fulfilled in an infinite number of

ways, but we should also worry that some individual resources may be irreplaceable. In sum, care ethics should motivate us to be cautious when we consider using limited resources in excess of meeting the sufficiency threshold.

Third, our obligation to ensure that future generations can meet their needs can give us guidance on how to use specific types of resources. Following from the previous section, we might use limited resources if we can show that they are in fact substitutable. For example, coal and petroleum are nonrenewable. Despite this, because there are other renewable sources of energy their consumption seems permissible so long as they do not harm other aspects of our ability to care. Of course these specific resources do this type of harm and so we should minimize our use of them for that reason. There is a case to be made that we are currently dependent on fossil fuels and that quitting their use outright would be catastrophic. For the care ethicist this simply means they must be viewed as a transitionary resource, not something to be relied on long term. Additionally, some resources are durable. This means that although they are not renewable, they can be put to use for extended periods of time. Iron for instance can be processed into steel that will hold up buildings for years to come. Taking everything else into account, the use of durable resources should be treated like the use of renewable resources, though even greater emphasis should be placed on using them in ways that will strengthen caring relations for as long as possible. Using iron to reinforce apartment buildings is far more permissible to the care ethicist than the production of car parts that will only be used for a few years before they are sent away to rust in a lot. Finally, I argue that we can use nonrenewable

resources if they can be reused or repurposed multiple times. To use the same example as earlier, producing steel for car parts becomes more permissible when there are systems in place to rework it after the car has been decommissioned. While some might think this justifies the use of plastics, it is important to note that this proposal differs radically from the practices we see today. Only some plastics are recyclable. Where we can, we should end the production of single use plastics entirely and aim only to use the ones that are genuinely recyclable, or used for extended periods of time.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that an ethic of care can account for an obligation to future generations. While Randall suggests that one cannot complete a caring encounter with future generations if we are to follow Noddings' methodology, I demonstrate that a more nuanced interpretation poses less difficulty than first thought. I also argue that Randall's misunderstanding of Gheaus' misses key insights about flourishing and parental rights. This is useful because there is a comparable argument to be made within a care-based framework that allows us to better assess the extent of our obligations generally, and obligations for the protection of resources specifically. Finally, I highlight that understanding the act of care through the lens of meeting needs creates a stronger and more tangible obligation to future generations than Randall's conditions of care. All this helps us to better situate care ethics within the context of the environment, and other intergenerational issues.

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