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Mazor on Indirect Obligations to Conserve Natural Resources for Future Generations

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Many of us have the intuition that we are duty-bound to conserve natural resources for the benefit of future generations. Yet there is a well-known difficulty in trying to identify the source of this obligation. It does not seem as though it could be a corollary to a right on the part of future people, since future people do not appear to possess the necessary features of a right-holder: they do not exist, do not currently have interests, cannot make claims, and so forth. Nor would it appear that the supposed obligations can be obligations of justice. Obligations of justice are generally thought to hold only between people who bear certain relations to each other, such as reciprocity or approximate equality of power to threaten. Yet future people can neither do anything for us nor to us,¹ and so no such relation between them and us holds.

In a recent article, Joseph Mazor concedes all this and sets out to demonstrate that we have indirect obligations—obligations to our contemporaries—to conserve natural resources for future generations (Mazor, 2010).² Mazor invites us to imagine that a group of interstellar explorers chances upon an uninhabited planet that contains some scarce, nonrenewable natural resource, ‘manna.’ These explorers are called ‘Gen 1ers.’ In the middle of the Gen 1ers’ lives another group of people, the ‘Gen 2ers,’ appear on the planet. Mazor assumes that all the inhabitants of this planet who meet the prerequisites for the possession of rights and stand in relations of justice to each other have equal claims to the manna and that these claims are best respected by giving to all such people a claim of ownership over a certain amount of it. As mentioned, however, Mazor does not assume that a non-existent person can possess rights or stand in a relation of justice to another person. The task, then, is to establish that before the Gen 2ers exist, the Gen 1ers have obligations to conserve manna for their benefit.

Mazor sets out to establish this in two steps. He argues, first, that once the Gen 2ers exist the Gen 1ers have an ‘equal-share-transfer’ obligation to them: the Gen 1ers must transfer to the Gen 2ers ‘a share of the manna or equivalent resources that is equal to the share received by each of the Gen 1ers’ (Mazor, 2010, p. 385, emphasis by Mazor). To disaggregate the obligations, Mazor maintains that each Gen 1er ‘has an obligation to

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contribute equally toward meeting the claims of each of the Gen 2ers once they exist’ (Mazor, 2010, p. 393), since, in general, a fair division of sacrifice is an equal one.

So far we have obligations of transfer but no obligations of conservation. In other words, we have obligations once the Gen 2ers exist but not before. In the second step of his argument, Mazor contends that if one Gen 1er fails to conserve enough manna such that once the Gen 2ers exist he can contribute equally to meeting his generation’s equal-share-transfer obligation to them, this would cause the other Gen 1ers to bear residual liability to the Gen 2ers—an obligation to compensate them for their not having received all the manna to which they were entitled. Mazor goes on to argue:

This residual liability on the part of each of the Gen 1ers forms the basis of an overlooked, justice-based obligation to conserve or save resources for the Gen 2ers. Although it is an obligation to conserve or save for the Gen 2ers, the conserving/saving obligation is not owed to the Gen 2ers. Rather, it is owed to fellow Gen 1ers who can rightly demand that they not be put in a situation where they are forced to enjoy fewer natural resources than their potentially profligate fellow Gen 1ers. (Mazor, 2010, p. 399, emphasis by Mazor)

Mazor applies this same line of reasoning to a context in which there are more than two generations and some of them do not overlap. He asks us to imagine a situation in which there are also a third and fourth generation. Importantly, however, each generation overlaps only with adjacent generations. Given this, it seems that the Gen 1ers would then have obligations only to the Gen 2ers, and it would appear that they could discharge those obligations by collectively setting aside half of the manna. Yet Mazor rejects this inference:

When the Gen 1ers try to hand over [half of the manna to the Gen 2ers], the Gen 2ers could rightly point out that, despite appearances, they are not being given an equal share of manna with which to lead their lives. . . . Since the Gen 2ers will have to share some of their manna with the Gen 3ers, they will not be able to enjoy the full half of the planet’s original manna that the Gen 1ers are proposing to leave them and thus will have less manna devoted to their lives than the Gen 1ers had. (Mazor, 2010, pp. 404–405, emphasis by Mazor)

By this reasoning, Mazor is able to reach a very appealing outcome: each generation is obligated to consume no more than that amount of manna that is consistent with every other generation consuming an equal amount, and each individual is obligated to consume no more than that amount of manna that is consistent with every other individual consuming that same amount. Insofar as any individual fails to discharge this obligation, she imposes additional burdens on other members of her generational cohort and thereby wrongs them.

Unfortunately, Mazor fails to make explicit and defend the premise that it is wrong to impose an obligation on another person in this manner. By way of investigating this premise, we may begin by asking whether it is wrong in general to impose obligations on others. As a matter of ethical theory, this is a troubling proposition. Facts about obligations, together with the facts about the correlating claims and attending powers and liabilities, are supposed to be systematically related to facts about permissibility. If they
were not, then it is not clear what use there would be in talking of obligations. The picture Mazor paints threatens to undermine the tightness of the connection between the two sets of facts, since it proposes that it can be impermissible to exercise one’s power to obligate another person. Moreover, there are plenty of cases in which it is not wrong to exercise one’s power to impose an obligation:

- Parents who already have at least one child impose obligations on their existing children when they have an additional child. As brother or sister, the existing child acquires obligations to love the new member of the family, look out for him/her, make occasional sacrifices for him/her, etc.
- If a person moves into an apartment or house that was previously unoccupied, this person’s new neighbors thereby acquire an obligation to refrain from making a lot of noise, especially at night.
- When one brings a child to a public place (most public places, anyway), the other people who are there acquire an obligation to refrain from swearing, to avoid telling off-colour jokes or stories, etc.

Given these examples, any hope of salvaging Mazor’s argument rests on the possibility of identifying a morally important difference between these cases and the conservation case. Indeed, there does appear to be a difference: there seems to be something independently objectionable about failing to conserve nonrenewable natural resources, but there does not seem to be anything independently objectionable about having another child, moving into a previously unoccupied house or apartment, or bringing a child to a public place. The thought, then, would be that it is wrong to impose obligations on others in the course of doing something that is independently wrong. Yet Mazor wants to do more than merely show that an action that is independently wrong is also wrong for a second reason.

Another suggestion would be that it is wrong for X to impose an obligation on Y if a fair division of sacrifice would make that very obligation X’s. Let us assume, for instance, that it is fair for parents to share equally the burden of supporting their children. Nevertheless, if one parent fails to fulfill his or her part of the obligation, then we would most likely say that the entire obligation falls on the other. Furthermore, it would seem that the one parent wrongs the other by so failing. Importantly, this wrongdoing does not depend on the fact that the failure also wrongs the child. The two wrongs are independent. The parallel to the conservation case is easy: among the Gen 1ers a fair division of the task of conserving resources for Gen 2 is an equal division, so it is wrong for any Gen 1er to leave his equal share of the obligation to some other Gen 1er(s).

However, there is another possible explanation of why one parent’s abdication wrongs the other: it is harmful. Suppose Agnes and Anthony have a child and Agnes refuses to do her part in providing support. She thereby leaves Anthony with a choice of whether to pick up the slack. If he picks up the slack, this will require extra expenditure of time and resources on his part, which is an opportunity cost to him and thus a harm. If he does not pick up the slack, then he will be forced to watch his child suffer, the child will resent him, he will be racked with guilt, and society will judge him harshly—all harms.

The explanation in terms of harm is also, I think, the best explanation. This is because reflection on another case seems to indicate that X’s imposing an obligation on Y, where that very obligation was X’s under a fair division of sacrifice, is not wrongful if it is not harmful. Consider a case in which James has to leave his home for a few months. Before
leaving, James assigns to his two children, Anthony and Agnes, the job of paying the bills on time so that he does not incur any lateness penalties. A fair division of sacrifice would involve Anthony and Agnes sharing this burden equally. Let us suppose that immediately after James leaves town, Agnes does the same, meaning that if the bills are going to get paid Anthony will have to do it. However, Anthony is so self-absorbed that he never feels any compunction about failing to fulfill his obligations to his father. Furthermore, James is simply incapable of getting angry at or punishing his children. So Anthony can simply decline to pay any of the bills and suffer no harm as a result. In this case, I presume we would say that Agnes imposed an obligation on Anthony that a fair division of sacrifice assigned to Agnes, but that Agnes neither harmed nor wronged Anthony.

At the risk of overgeneralizing from a mere two thought experiments, it seems that when X imposes an obligation on Y where that obligation was X’s under a fair division of sacrifice, this constitutes a wrong if, and only if, Y’s failure to pick up the slack would lead to Y being harmed. In the conservation case, does one person’s failure to pick up the slack for profligate members of her generation harm her? It does not seem so. The collective obligation to conserve simply is not taken seriously enough such that there is a social or psychological sanction attached to a failure to pick up the slack. (There is not even much of a sanction attached to a failure to do one’s fair part.) In this respect, the conservation case is much more like the bill-paying case. And even if the collective obligation to conserve were taken more seriously there would still be difficulty in blaming any one person for failing to pick up the slack when so many other people could have done so.

Should we say, alternatively, that failing to pick up the slack is harmful qua wrongdoing? At this point, all I can say is that I reject the idea that doing wrong, qua wrongdoing, is harmful to the agent. Arguing for this, however, would take me well beyond the scope of this commentary.

Notes

1 There might be some exceptions to this (not telling malicious lies about us, for example), but they are insignificant.
2 See Mazor (2010, pp. 382–383) for Mazor’s concession and for some relevant citations regarding the preconditions for the possession of rights and for obligations of justice. By conceding that future people do not now have rights, Mazor manages to sidestep the non-identity problem, as he points out on pp. 390–391. Another argument for indirect obligations to conserve resources can be found in Schwartz (1978).
3 The reason why Mazor inserts the ‘or save’ qualifier is to allow for the possibility that the Gen 1ers might find a way to provide the Gen 2ers with resources equivalent in value to the manna to which the Gen 2ers are entitled instead of the manna itself.
4 Or, rather, a population-proportional amount. It would be equal if all generations were of equal size.
5 Thanks to Joe Mazor for making this suggestion to me in conversation and for providing this example.
6 To take care of any worries about moral responsibility, we can stipulate that Anthony and Agnes are adults. We can also stipulate, to ensure that James’s request is reasonable, that Anthony and Agnes still live with James.

References
