

CHAPTER THREE

REPLY TO NIGEL DOWER

ROBIN ATTFIELD

Nigel Dower has contributed greatly over a long period to the ethics of development and of the environment. Largely I agree with the various points made in his chapter, and in particular the point that individuals have responsibilities in environmental matters. In several places he has taken my thinking forward to a further stage. Some minor qualifications, however, are in place.

(1.) I am not sure that Parfit's point about some actions being wrong because of the set they belong to had already been made by Mill. Mill's point was about classes of action, such as acts of linguistic deception, and the difference made to society if people's confidence in not being deceived were to be undermined (Mill, 1910, 21). Parfit's point was about sets of related actions with imperceptibly small impacts that cumulatively make a large difference (Parfit, 1984, 70, 78-82) such as (we might say, although he did not) acts of emitting carbon dioxide through air journeys, which jointly change the proportion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. There are certainly parallels, since Mill's point is about impacts on the cultural atmosphere, which might be thought analogous to impacts on the physical atmosphere. Yet Mill was surely writing rather about how the shared trust of members of society can be eroded by a number of acts of deception that would otherwise do little harm; whereas Parfit's point, or at least the way in which I was using it in the 'Mediated Responsibilities' paper (Attfield, 2009), concerned sets of acts each of which cumulatively contributes to the same serious atmospheric change. Mill's point supplies a ground for rule-consequentialism, while Parfit's works in a different way, urging that the consequences of token acts and omissions must be considered in the light of wide (and often world-wide) contexts, including the actions of others (what we might call a consequentialist version of Kantian ethics). To this extent, Parfit was, I suggest, saying something new and original,

although I can see that there was much in common between Mill's move and his.

(2.) While I agree that alliances are needed with people whose ethics are based on rights, and there again with those who derive everything in ethics from contractarianism, and while I try to practice this kind of alliance-building in practical debates (including some that are ongoing), I am less sanguine than Dower about rights theorists having something coherent to say about the rights of future people. I fully agree that we should be concerned about the quality of life of future people, but do not regard the relevant obligations as owed *to* those people, or as corresponding to rights that they have (or even will have) against us.

This is for Parfitian reasons. Setting aside the people of the future who have already been born or conceived, the rest consist of multiple alternative populations, which cannot all exist together; their identity is not only unknown, but has yet to be determined by the parents who eventually bring into being some and not others. So is it possible for all these possible people to have rights, for example against the current generation, for example to be brought into being? If this were the case, the current generation would turn out to carry contradictory obligations to bring into being pairs or trios etc of alternative occupants of the same womb or of the same living space, because of the rights that each member of these pairs or trios would have. (And if we instead say that the rights belong not to possible people but to actual future people, the problem becomes that we can have no idea which these will be, or therefore which rights we are called on to honour, at least in matters of bringing them into being.)

Parfit explains this in a different way; rights can only be carried by those who can have them honoured or disregarded, and who can thus fare better or worse in different worlds. But many possible people exist only in one possible world. So, until some of them actually come into being, we cannot coherently speak of their rights. What we can do is try to bring it about that whichever of the possible people come into being have as high a quality of life as possible. We should do this because it would be wrong not to do it, but not because we owe it to future people who are at present merely possible people, nor because of their rights.

But this said, those current people who regard future people as equally capable of carrying rights as our contemporaries may well be motivated by these beliefs into effort to perform their responsibilities, and their assistance may well be required by those of us who recognise responsibilities of similar content, but on a different ethical basis. There is a similar story to tell about contractarianism, but I will set it aside for present purposes.

I would like to add the parallel suggestion that alliances are also needed among *environmentalists* of divergent metaphysical persuasions, as well as among those promoting opportunities for meaningful lives. If so, then possibly people such as Alan Holland should welcome alliances with environmentalist believers in creation, such as Christopher Southgate and probably Nigel Dower as well as I might count ourselves as being, despite finding their arguments unconvincing and their stances unstable, defective or even positively inconsistent; while our metaphysics should arguably be monistic, pragmatic factors surely require applied pluralism in practice.

(3.) Next, I would like to insert a short note on history. Dower is right that, faced with a choice between historical approaches to environmental responsibility and ones that work from the present situation, I choose the latter. There could be a choice between ascribing the burden of paying for mitigation and adaptation to the historical polluters of the industrial revolution (on the one hand) and (on the other) to those who combine being current polluters and having sufficient current resources to contribute to these costs. One reason why these principles diverge is that some historical polluters may not be able in the present to pay for an amount of mitigation and adaptation proportionate to their historical contribution to pollution; Russia may well be an example, and Kazakhstan another. But concern for sustainability and for mitigating climate change seems to dictate that we select principles that can produce the desired effects, and this strongly indicates selecting principles based on contemporary capacities rather than on history.

However, this does not mean that I am committed to rejecting the relevance of historical factors in general, even though I am a consequentialist. Consequentialists can, for example, support rules of rewarding and punishing, both of them backward-looking institutions, because of the positive difference that they make to current and future society, or, in other words, for forward-looking reasons, and can for parallel reasons uphold the desirability of promises (including ones from the past) being kept. (See further my response to Clare Palmer (in this volume).) They can also take into account the historical associations of (say) a landmark as a reason for preserving it, as long as current people are likely to care about such historical significance. I believe that this openness to historical factors is compatible with rejection of history-based stances about justice such as that of Robert Nozick. Some philosophers, such as Holland, are rather keen on taking historical factors into account, and this has made me eager to explain that my overall stance does not oblige me to dissent.

(4.) Finally I would like to add a comment on individual responsibilities. Dower asks whether vanguard actions and behaving in a green or

environmentalist manner are supererogatory or obligatory. I agree with him that in some cases such actions are obligatory, and at the same time that taking this view does not commit us to blaming those who do not perform such actions. There is a difference between what it would be wrong not to do, and what people can be expected to do and blamed for neglecting to do.

This said, I think it is worth pointing out that some vanguard actions could still be supererogatory, deeds which are morally desirable without being obligatory. I have written elsewhere about these distinctions, and possible criteria for their general application, for example in *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (Attfield, 1995), and do not mean to launch into that field here. But let us look at the matter like this. Most if not all relevant vanguard actions and omissions can be regarded as virtuous ones, displaying green traits of character (such as those commended in a recent article in *Utilitas* by Dale Jamieson (Jamieson, 2007)). But far from all virtuous deeds and virtuous abstentions are obligatory. They are deeds that we ought to do (in the sense of actions that we ought, ideally, to do), but not always deeds that it would be wrong not to do. Almost everyone who believes that there is a category of acts that are supererogatory (morally desirable but not obligatory) would also take the view that being virtuous is not always mandatory or obligatory, and is therefore sometimes supererogatory, whether it is a matter of being saintly or heroic (to cite the phrases used by J.O. Urmson when writing about this matter (Urmson, 1958)), or of just doing the decent thing, or even of just being nice and behaving accordingly.

If so, we should not represent all vanguard actions as obligations; indeed to hold this view might take a lot of the fun from vanguard actions, which can be manifested in all kinds of ingenious and eccentric ways, without behaving in ingenious or eccentric ways in these connections becoming obligatory. My suggestion, then, is that while some green acts and omissions are obligatory, such as limiting one's air travel, perhaps, others, including some life-style choices, are not. Examples might include, for example, choices of what to wear. Somewhere there is a cut-off point, where vanguard actions stop being supererogatory and become obligatory; while I have written about the upper limits of duty elsewhere (Attfield, 1995), I leave to the reader the question of where, in terms of green behaviour, that cut-off point is.

So my response to Dower's final suggestion of a "constructive amendment" is to accept it subject to the further "constructive amendment" just presented, and also subject to the further amendment, mentioned at the July 2009 conference by Jenneth Parker, that many of the

relevant obligations belong neither to individuals nor to governments, but to companies and corporations, which should be held accountable not only legally but also morally much more often than they are.

References

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