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FUTURE-GENERATION ETHICS**

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Abstract

This theoretical paper starts arguing that the amoral approach to environmental issues is unacceptable and a moral approach, inevitable. It then explores how the concept of a duty towards future generations can help to incorporate environmental issues in the discussion of business ethics and corporate social responsibility. By drawing a parallelism with the theme of memory, the paper distinguishes between a morality of future generations and an ethics of future generations. Finally, the authors argue that business ethics could benefit from focussing on the ethical duties (rather than the moral ones) of companies towards the descendants closest to the stakeholders with which the company works and interacts.

Keywords: natural environment, amoral approach, sustainability, future generations, ethics of memory.

Introduction

The environmental crisis in its different forms (loss of biodiversity, global warming, water shortages, soil erosion, toxic chemical products, inter alia) is one of humanity's major concerns. Since the environmental crisis is considered to be caused or at least accelerated by human activity, companies and organisations have been and will continue to be scrutinised because of the impact their activity has on the environment,

their need for resources and their decisive importance as social agents. However, the question arises as to whether the language of morality, in the broadest sense,ⁱ is useful and necessary in order to deal with this concern or whether, on the contrary, it is a hindrance. The doubt is even greater about the language, concepts and theories of business ethics. In this paper we analyse whether companies can be said to have a moral ethical duty towards the environment. Firstly, we hold that an amoral approach to environmental issues is unacceptable and a moral approach, inevitable. We then consider that a moderate anthropocentrism of the type that focuses on duties towards future generations may be more useful than ecocentrism when it comes to considering the part companies play in the environmental crisis. We then distinguish between ethical duties and moral duties towards future generations before moving to argue that although the two types of duties may clash, they may also strengthen each other. In the final section we will see how the stakeholder theory – one of the theories employed most in the realms of business ethics and corporate social responsibility – may, to varying extents, enable a sort of ethical duty towards future generations (not necessarily a moral one), albeit a duty that becomes problematic and more complex in the case of generations in the more distant future.

Critique of the amoral approach

Academics and professionals have raised a variety of objections to moral language and moral theories as suitable for dealing with or discussing business-related environmental matters, accusing them, inter alia, of giving practitioners no answers or encouragement but promoting a feeling of guilt that would lead nowhere (Braungart, 2008; Crane, 2000; Fineman, 1998). Furthermore, the hegemonic approach to the environment in business organisations tends to eliminate moral considerations (Crane,

2000; Fineman, 1998). The reason is that in most instances this amoral perspective is seen as the best or only strategy enabling professionals in the industry to present the environment as a legitimate business theme, given that they have to take action within a given system of norms, virtues, values and ideals characteristic of the business world (Brenkert, 1995). Supposedly global issues such as the Earth's carrying capacity would provoke confusion, distraction, anxiety or stupor. Hence, according to the amoral standpoint, making managers bear the brunt of moralising language would serve no purpose or be rather ineffective (Fineman, 1998).

Although this paper cannot answer these accusations exhaustively, it must be said firstly that the main moral perspectives today are associated not with guilt but rather, depending on the philosophical line adopted, with the search for happiness, freedom or justice. Moreover, all moral approaches are based on the ability to reason out human actions and human beliefs, rather than on the intention of provoking a feeling of confusion or anxiety.

Secondly, regarding the accusation of being discouraging or inducing inactivity, one should keep in mind how complex and difficult it is to determine what stimulates and motivates people, including corporate executives. Perhaps--although this is very debatable--corporate executives were never moved by altruism or empathy. However, even in this extreme instance, we must remember that some of the main strands of moral philosophy, like those that emanate from Hobbes (notably Gauthier's social contract theory) base morality on self-interest and the rational pursuit of one's own desires, i.e. the constrained maximization of one's expected utility. Even Kant's morality can be argued to be "essentially a matter of what each of us owes himself as a free and rational being" (Larmore, 2008). The tradition of moral perfectionism is also an eminently individual task (Cavell, 1990). One might be fully dissatisfied with all these

theories, but one cannot maintain that the reason for managers or anybody to abandon the moral standpoint is that it inevitably commits one to altruism.

Thirdly, as regards those who criticise morality because it provides no answers, one must ask whether the problem is really the lack of answers or that the answers are unpopular. Indeed, the answers--and even the questions--cause discomfort because they deal with fundamental issues like our main source of energy, i.e. the burning of fossil fuels, which supports our whole economy. It is true that, even if one gets some answers from the moral point of view, this does not guarantee that we will act in accordance with them. There might be some reasons that prevent us from adjusting our behaviour to our moral outlook or, as Gardiner has pointed out, that make moral corruption particularly likely in the case of our environmental responsibilities: the fact that environmental degradation and climate change are resilient phenomena, the spatial and temporal dispersion of causes and effects, the fragmentation of agency and the institutional inadequacy (Gardiner, 2006). All of these adds great complexity to the moral outlook and to moral action, but does not make it superfluous.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to take into account that although some maintain that morality can indeed provide guidelines, instruments, standards and criteria for use in dilemmas; others argue that the main role for morality is just to ask relevant questions about our actions, decisions and beliefs. Further, as we will see later in this paper, there might be inescapable dilemmas and tensions, as well as reasonable disagreement in moral matters: morality might not always speak in a single voice. Yet, even in that case and even if one is not sure that absolute, irrefutable or definitive grounds for environmental duties exist, thinking about the best line of action contributes elements for discussion, persuasion and learning. This is not just critical to establish a more diverse agenda, but to evaluate better our beliefs and our actions.

Fourthly, the tendency towards amoralization assumes that corporate environmental policies can be justified only insofar as they reduce costs by increasing efficiency; or insofar as they minimise greater damage that might arise from pressure applied by customers, regulators and public opinion, even if this means accepting additional costs at the onset; or insofar as they help the company to seize business opportunities stemming from society's new environmental expectations. None of this is *per se* contrary to morality. In fact, amoralization heightens the view that everything related to morality is contrary to profit making: which does not need to be always the case. A different, debatable point would be whether, at certain profit levels, moral hazards become greater due to higher possible social and environmental impacts, or higher pressures on individuals; or whether certain structures and cultures sometimes convey an unhealthy fixation with profits: a sort of pathology that transforms one of the company's goals into its only aim (Goodpaster, 2007). But none of this justifies getting rid of the moral point of view.

Finally, eliminating all moral references when addressing the environment would mean allowing the opponent to taste victory before the game starts by leaving the concept in the hands of those who criticise and interpret it wrongly. The moral viewpoint seems inevitable, insofar as the environmental crisis – even if it did not actually lead to total collapse and to jeopardise our survival – can cause us to lose many of the things we value (diversity of species, certain farm produce, water as an easily available resource, aesthetic experience, etc), and can, above all, cause innocent people to suffer unnecessarily as a result of the environmental damage caused by others. Furthermore, since all human action can be viewed through a moral lens, and since human activity takes place in the environment, it is transitively reasonable to show concern for the moral aspects of our impact on the environment.

In sum, it is not easy to avoid the moral standpoint when one talks about environmental issues and business, partly because there are several theories about what morality is and what it is for. Indeed, a completely amoral stance is virtually impossible. In the end, the same authors who point out the inefficiency and the absence of moral language when incorporating environmental issues in management cannot avoid making some sort of warning or appeal with moral undertones, even if they avoid using this adjective. Crane, for example, regrets that the amoral perspective hinders the “development of a more pluralist agenda” and excludes fiercer criticism (Crane, 2000). Fineman, on the other hand, voices certain hopes about the power of responsible employees, investors and consumers to question the business system itself (Fineman, 1998).

It is far from clear that the amoral approach, which often presents itself as the only pragmatic option, can by itself be enough to deal with the challenges posed by the environmental crisis (Prasad & Elmes, 2005). Corporate greening can remain at a very superficial level or be limited to a few, very specific actions, without ever querying the issues underlying the consumer and energy model. For example, the green schemes of certain companies in the oil or mining industries have been criticised because, when all is said and done, the main products of these companies cause a great deal of pollution and the investment made in alternative energies is very low in comparison with overall oil production investment (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009).

Ethics and future generations

Leaving aside the debate about the possible plausibility of ecocentrismⁱⁱ and ethical extensionsⁱⁱⁱ, the most common strategy to treat environmental matters within the field of business ethics is to consider them to be a question of solidarity, justice or

rights between different generations (e.g. Jeurissen & Keijzers, 2004). Treating environmental matters as a problem of the relationship between the present and the future generations is a indisputably anthropocentric approach and it might seem to be a kind of reduction. Nonetheless, it is a weak type of anthropomorphism, which curbs the consequences of stronger forms of anthropocentrism, approaching the results sought by ecocentrism without adopting its principles and inherent difficulties. This weak anthropocentrism is in keeping with the famous definition of sustainable development given in the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987).^{iv}

One must, in this instance, ask how one can ensure that the interests of future generations (or at least the interests we can legitimately assume that they will have) are heard and taken into account when taking decisions in the present. In the field of business ethics, one would ask what it would mean for a company or organisation to have an inner voice that takes future generations into account in every decision about budgets, service and product design, investment in human capital, and the enlargement or upkeep of facilities. We could imagine a council of future affairs as part of the corporate governance structure of every major company (White, 2007). Such council could consist of independent experts and scientists and members of the civil society able to look beyond present-day prejudices and interests, and be expressly responsible for safeguarding the interests of future generations. The task of thinking the details of how this would be in practice is obviously enormous and has extremely important political and educational repercussions.^v

However, certain philosophical issues still cast a shadow over the concept of future generations. One problems is that it does not specify how near or far the future generations. Another problem, and one of the most frequent criticisms of the definition

of sustainability in the Brundtland Report, is that it does not define what is to be safeguarded.

Taking this last point first, this leads us to the distinction between strong and weak sustainability. According to the strong interpretation of the sustainability concept (Daly & Cobb, 1989; Haughton & Hunter, 1994), humanity has a duty to safeguard a given natural capital – including virgin spaces and natural resources which cannot be replaced by economic, technological or social capital – so that future generations may have a quality of life and opportunities, which are at least similar to those of today's generation. However, in political and economic circles there is a tendency to slide towards a weak version of sustainability. One common way of doing this is applying a discount rate to what we bequeath to future generations, it being argued that in the course of the forthcoming years or centuries, thanks to the technological progress the present generation has instigated, measures will be found to offset the adverse effects of the activities of the present.

Yet, since it is virtually impossible to calculate the probability of this happening, this argument is based on an act of faith (Cowen & Parfit, 1992). Generally speaking, relatively little progress has been made in clean technologies to date, in comparison with other types of technological progress intended to increase production efficiency based on extract-use-throwaway logic. Hence the discount rate is based on the unproven belief that future generations will live better than us in terms of economic and technological resources and will, therefore, be able to solve the problems they inherit from us, or that these problems will be smaller than the opportunities we provide them with. The most likely scenario is, however, that some will live better than us (the average European) and others, worse. Whether those who will live better than us are few and those who will live worse than us are many depends to an important extent on

decisions taken today and their environmental consequences; i.e., the reduction of natural capital. The question is then about our views concerning a just global society and the type of society we want to bequeath to future generations. These are questions that so far political philosophy has largely ignored, since its context for discussing justice has been predominantly the nation-state and the present.

Another reason to object the discount rate is that it wrongly assumes that future generations will prefer economic gain over natural resources or even health. On the contrary, one should assume that a stable climate, biodiversity or water resources are as valuable, if not more, in fifty or a hundred years as today.

The problem of distance

The second major difficulty of the concept of duties towards future generations is their distance and identity. The philosophical problem of the identity of future generations entails a paradox. Since they are an inseparable outcome of many of today's decisions and actions, some of which also imply the degradation of the planet, future generations will have no right to complain about the environment they inherit: the alternative for them would in fact be to have never existed. This is what Parfit baptised the "repugnant conclusion" (Parfit, 1982).

Another problem is that the structure of our relationship with future generations may reproduce that of the prisoner's dilemma (Gardiner, 2001). Each generation suffers the consequences of the environmental degradation caused by previous generation(s) which in turn passes problems on to the next. Although each generation has a vested interest in the previous generation not degrading the environment, it apparently has no incentive for showing concern for the next. However, it is acknowledged that the dynamics of the prisoner's dilemma may change when there is a wider context of

interaction, when the parties involved know that they will meet each other again or when they are attached to each other in some way. In these situations, a broader perspective of self-interest comes into play.

This wider context of interaction and a relation of attachment would exist if we understood future generations to consist of those individuals with whom one has a very special connection such as children or grandchildren: what we can call close generations. However, if future generations are defined as people that persons alive today will never get to know, then duties towards future generations have a problem of a lack of proximity: a serious obstacle to the moral instinct or motivation.

The future-generation ethic moderates strong anthropocentrism and tempers human chauvinism. Indeed, the more distant these generations are, the more it seems to be tempered. But thinking about the future of one's children is not the same as thinking about the life of the generations that will be around in 150 or 300 years. It is difficult to imagine what life will be like so far ahead and the sort of link they might have with those of us alive today. Human beings are far more attached to the people they know and can relate to, those they recognise, those with whom they can identify, or those whose lives they can imagine. An inherent problem of the future-generation concept is that it blurs the boundary between those that are close and distant in time.

Little mention of the relationships between generations can be found in the history of western thought. Other cultures do, however, make interesting references. The confederation of the North American Indian Iroquois tribe posited in its Great Law the need to take the "seventh generation" into account when taking decisions.^{vi} But when referring to the seventh generation, is the generic future-generation concept more specific? It does indeed seem to be still a very long time: we would be talking about the great-grandchildren of our great-great-grandchildren, i.e. about 150 to 200 years

depending on how the generations are counted. Clearly, this does not solve the problem of motivation or moral instinct.

It is true that the weakness of moral instinct or motivation does not mean that there are no good reasons for believing that there is a moral duty. What must, therefore, be done is to find ways of awakening or educating this instinct. It was, however, probably easier for the Iroquois to imagine this relationship with the seventh generation because their life varied little from one generation to the next, they had very stable rituals and traditions, and their population was not very large. The ability to look ahead is probably not unrelated to a stable lifestyle and stable social system. Context, and not only length of time, might play a role.

Imagining others and identifying with them are difficult when looking both forwards and back in time. It is easier to feel close to our grandparents, but to what extent do we relate to those who lived in our cities or towns seven generations ago? If we could communicate with the generations alive some 150 years ago we would probably give them our heartfelt thanks for *Madame Bovary*, *The Origin of the Species*, the opening of the Suez channel and Meucci's first telephone. We would also warn them about and criticise them for European colonialism in Africa and Asia, the persistence of slavery in the United States and the introduction of rabbits into Australia, which went on to become a veritable plague. But, what would we say to them about the first modern oil wells in Pennsylvania, with all the benefits of oil, and its environmental impact too? Here we probably start to hesitate. In other words, looking back in time and adopting a moral standpoint is not easy matter, and neither is looking forwards. Here also context might play a role: it might more difficult to keep a long-lasting collective memory in unstable circumstances and with little cultural homogeneity.

The ethics of memory as a model

Our argument is that the way we relate to the past may provide an insight into how we relate to the future. We can learn about our duty to show concern for future generations by drawing parallels with our duty of remembrance of generations past. For questions of ethics do indeed arise also about our relationship with the past. Why do we criticise an individual or group that fails to remember important events in their past? Do we have a moral duty to remember certain people and events? If we devote a great deal of effort to remembering, are we not fostering melancholy or bitterness instead of the trust and reconciliation needed to move ahead? How important should the dead be in the lives of the living? Not only individuals, but also societies that have gone through regime changes had to deal with or are dealing with this type of question from South Africa and Germany to Chile and Spain.

Similar questions arise when we think about future generations. Is it commendable to take them into account in our decisions and reprehensible to leave them out? How important should the unborn be in the life of the living? Are we not bringing our ability to innovate, move on and make progress to a standstill by worrying too much about the future?

The questions about the past and the future are important in the realm of organisations too. Organisations wonder what type of efforts should be done to preserve their identity and culture, including ways to ensure that their members remember the organisation's origin and history, the personality of its founders, the most important successes and most controversial mistakes. If this is crucial in order to safeguard corporate identity and learn from successes and failures, then it is also essential to look forward and envisage future trends that concern consumers, employees, shareholders and other stakeholders. If organisations have a broad vision they will even look beyond

today's generation. However, to what extent can one say they have a duty to do so? And how many generations ahead must they look?

When addressing the dilemmas of memory, the philosopher Avishai Margalit (Margalit, 2002) suggested distinguishing between the morality of memory and the ethics of memory, which may be of help in dealing with the concept of future generations and its integration in the field of business ethics. According to Margalit, although in fact we have an ethical duty to remember, we are only morally obliged to do so in very few instances. It must be noted first of all that his use of the terms "ethics" and "morality" is different from the conventional one. "Ethics" is often used in reference to the study or intellectual discipline that deals with morality, and "morality" to refer descriptively to a code of conduct or principles that guide the behaviour of a group of people or which, prescriptively, aims to be valid for all rational beings. However, according to the distinction made here, ethics focuses on the relationships between people of a certain type such as relatives, friends or neighbours, whilst morality is based on generic concepts such as human beings, women or sick people. In the case of ethics, what causes one to act in a certain way and justifies one's action is the relationship with the other person: "I help him because he is my son or my brother ". In the case of morality, what causes one to act and justifies one's action is an attribute of the person, such as the dignity of every human being: "I help him because he is a human being". One might say that ethics concerns the type of relationships with the specific beings we are closest to and with whom we have special links: "thick" relationships in Walzer's terms (Walzer, 1994). Morality on the other hand concerns the type of relationships with those who are further away or with whom we have weaker or thinner links. In other words, morality is distant and impartial in terms of time and space, and

can be global or universal, whereas ethics is partial and concerns the people to whom we are particularly attached.

In Margalit's view, behaving ethically would not be morally incorrect: partiality is legitimate and justifiable, because morality would not address any specific individual. In certain cases, however, behaving morally might be ethically reprehensible. It is open to question whether there is such an asymmetry or not between the two spheres. For our purposes, we only want to claim that it is useful to distinguish between ethics and morality: they can clash on occasion as well as strengthen each other and it seems impossible and undesirable to eliminate ethical relationships and retain just neutral morality. Refusing to unite the two-fold perspective is, in fact, to uphold pluralism, complexity and tension as an unavoidable fact (Nagel, 1986).

According to Margalit, when we wonder whether one has an ethical duty to remember people and places from the past we are referring to a duty which is like a medical obligation. If one wants to be healthy, one must take exercise, eat no fatty food, stop smoking, etc. Likewise, if one wants to establish ethical relationships, one must remember the past one has in common with that person or group of persons. But there is no obligation to have ethical relationships. Being ethical is an option. Although in practice people are usually involved in many thick relationships which are difficult to extricate oneself from, it is possible to lead a solitary life or even be a misanthrope and simply fulfil one's moral duties. However, it is not possible to have ethical relationships if one does not cultivate a shared memory. An ethical relationship cannot tolerate amnesia. The people one has ethical relationships with are those with whom one has a common past and keep certain memories that one wants to share.

If we apply this terminology to the realm of organisations, we might ask whether organisations are places where ethical relationships (thick relationships) between

different members and groups are fostered. If so, this would be, among other things, because there is a shared past that remains alive. Ethical organizations do not suffer amnesia. We might then ask whether organisations have some sort of duty to encourage ethical relationships and the preserve a common memory.

From memory to future generations

We can now apply the same model used to treat the issue of memory to our relationship with future generations. A distinction must be drawn between future-generation ethics and future-generation morality. There are future generations to whom one is attached – the generations in close proximity such as children and grandchildren. Taking them into account in one's actions would be ethical behaviour. This involves being concerned about their health, their happiness and their capacity to prosper and have opportunities in life. Just as ethics implies a community (of at least two) conserving a common past, ethics also entails looking forward together towards the future. The people with whom one has thick relationships are those with whom one imagines a common future or those whose future concerns us. This duty is also like a medical obligation because it is based on the premise that just as we would rather be healthy than otherwise, we would rather have thick ties than weak ties.. Hence looking forward towards future generations, just as memory, is a sort of cement that helps bond thick relationships and configures ethical communities. And it is also similar in the sense that the concern for the future of the persons one cares about requires a small, daily effort, and a way of life.

The challenge for business ethics is how to apply this insight into the realm of organizations. As we will see shortly, this means that if organisations choose to be a space or network of ethical (thick) relationships, then they should be concerned about

the future of their members and the future generations to whom these members are attached. And organizations might need to have this sort of relationships, since for them the option of solitary existence and misanthropy are not really available.

On the other hand, showing concern for unidentified, distant future generations would be a moral rather than an ethical duty. This raises the question of a lack of attachment and identification. Is it possible to talk about an impartial, universal moral duty in this respect? Returning to Margalit's views on memory, there are exceptional cases in which there may be a moral duty of remembrance. In these instances, the duty would not only be between those that have or desire to have thick or privileged relationships exist, but between all human beings. In these exceptional cases in which the very concept of humanity is being affected, all humanity should strive to maintain a shared memory. Examples include major crimes and atrocities perpetrated against mankind, paradigmatic acts of humiliation and cruelty against human beings: the gulags, Nazi concentration camps, Hiroshima, the slave trade, deportations, mass exterminations, etc. Mankind should remember these obvious examples of radical evil and there would be something morally wrong if intentionally or unintentionally such episodes fell into oblivion.

Translating these views into our concerns in this paper, could we be talking about radical evil in the case of future generations? If global warming, water shortages, and loss of farmland and biodiversity caused by actions committed by present generations lead to mass migrations, violent confrontations, epidemics and hunger, we might be facing a case of radical evil. Even so, the theoretical and practical problem arising is that, unlike the paradigmatic examples, in this instance we are talking about the long-term consequences of minor, non-deliberate actions and not of the manifest, face-to-face, cruelty of present generations.

In addition, we have the difficulty mentioned earlier of the lack of attachment and identification with the distant, unidentified people who will suffer these consequences. The relationships with mankind in general are tenuous, abstract relationships. Individuals and communities are not able to remember all atrocities in the same way nor are we able to show the same concern for the future of all the human beings around the globe. For this reason, we think that the concern for future generations will be stronger in the case of close generations and will dovetail better into realms of ethics than of morality. Even in the case of the Iroquois Indians mentioned earlier, it is very likely that they exhorted people to think about *their* seventh generation, the seventh generation of their own community and not that of humanity in general.

However, contrary to Margalit's line of argument, one does not need to think that ethics and morality always contradict each other: the moral duty of showing concern for future generations may be strengthened by the ethical duty of showing concern for the closest people who will replace us. The example Margalit uses when referring to remembrance is the monument in memory of the Holocaust built in the centre of Berlin. He asks: Is it a monument by humanity for humanity, or should those who are remembered be remembered as Jews and gypsies? Did the Germans who erected it do so to express themselves as Germans or as members of humanity? The question is, in other words, whether the monument is an expression and an attempt to reconstruct an ethical community or a moral community. Margalit seems to hold a preference for the ethical level because the impact and involvement are far greater at the level of specific individuals and groups. But it is also true that the two aspects can strengthen rather than contradict each other.

As regards the future, the question is whether what concerns and should concern the present generation are the prospects of a seventh generation of humanity or whether the emphasis should be placed on the quality of life of one's future compatriots or the future neighbours of one's town, or even more concretely on that of children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. In line with this distinction, human beings can be morally concerned about the seventh generation of humanity and ethically concerned about the second or third generation of their own community. Expecting individuals to take an interest in the wellbeing of every member of the human race in the present and future generations and become their caretakers is probably to place too high a demand.

Yet emphasising the ethical dimension more than the moral option does not mean positioning oneself outside the realms of morality. Morality sets the boundaries and reminds us that there is a point beyond which favouring those to whom one is attached clearly begins to harm those outside such relationships. At the same time we must wonder whether ethics can educate the moral instinct, mentioned earlier. Although we said that a misanthrope could remain within the boundaries of morality, it is easier to respect and care for the possible harm cause to a distant seventh generation if one develops a concern for the generation coming immediately afterwards and to which one has direct links. The close relationship can be a springboard for imagining a link in a more tenuous relationship.

Furthermore, environmental problems accumulate. Even though some problems will not be trespassed directly to the next generation (but to more distant ones), the difficulties in solving the problem increase with the passing of time and the persistence of the causes. Therefore, either the present generation passes direct environmental problems to the next generation or, if they don't face the consequences directly and

assuming that they will care for their own children and grandchildren, the challenges they will have to solve will be bigger than ours.

Implications for the company

How do these ethical and moral concerns for future generations fit into theories about company-society interaction? One of the most commonly referred theories in the fields of business ethics, corporate social responsibility and strategy is the stakeholder theory, which addresses the type of relationship that a company must have with the different groups affected by the company or which may affect its activities (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). The two main questions posed by this theory are: Who are the stakeholders the company has duties towards? And, what sort of duties are they? According to the distinction proposed earlier, we should also ask: do these duties stem from an ethical or moral relationship?

According to one broad interpretation of the term “stakeholder”, it includes anybody that could affect or be affected by a company’s business. The problem with this broad definition is that it makes virtually everyone a potential stakeholder of a given company, either directly or indirectly. If this is the definition accepted, the relationships would be weak and very vague. One might talk about moral duties, i.e. those that come into play in cases of radical evil, obvious attacks on the dignity of human beings. Yet, for this view to function, one would have to do away with the idea of balance or equilibrium with which stakeholder theory is often associated, i.e. the idea that managers need to search for a balance between different interests. When one talks about global warming and the health and life of future generations, this balance may be accommodating and seem morally unacceptable (Orts & Strudler, 2002).

At any rate, there is also a narrower definition of the term “stakeholder” according to which they are only those with whom there is “some form of cooperation

that produces mutual benefits” which are freely accepted. In these cases we could say that certain obligations are indeed generated between stakeholders (Phillips & Reichart, 2000). According to this definition, duties are always between specific people or groups and arise from a relationship entered into willingly by both parties. In this case, nature itself would obviously not be a stakeholder, despite the attempts made by certain authors to defend this premise (Starik, 1995), and neither would future generations, unlike what other authors maintain (Jeurissen et al., 2004), since there is not possibility for them to refuse being affected by the activity of the company.

However, it may be said that the relationships envisioned by the different versions of the stakeholders theory and the way it is brought to practice by companies are near, close-knit relationships rather than impersonal, distant, abstract relationships. Relationships with the different, specific groups with which the company or management interact (consumers, investors, employees, local communities, etc) are viewed not as anonymous and merely formal but as more personalised and trust-based. In this respect, in keeping with the distinction made earlier, relationships of a more ethical type are usually called for or suggested. These relationships would be thick because the company is not unconcerned about these different groups. It is not only a matter of avoiding cases of radical evil. Indeed, the stakeholder theory posits that for a company to run well in all aspects, it must generate trust and take care of the quality of its relationship with the different groups it interacts with. It would be building a sort of ethical community.

Our conclusion is then the following. Insofar as a vision of the company from the stakeholder theory perspective is related to building an ethical community and insofar as this construction is related to preserving the memory of a common past and the concern for a shared future, there will be some room for future generations, in the

sense of near-by future generations. This is so because companies can safely assume that employees, customers, suppliers and the neighbours in local communities would not willingly accept the benefits of being associated with the company if this had adverse consequences for their own children and grandchildren. If this were the case, these concerns would then become part of the wider responsibilities attributed to the company, whereas future generations more distant in time and space would not, and neither would nature in general.

This conclusion obviously raises problems. Ethically the company would be justified in giving its stakeholders' direct descendents priority over others. Further, the conclusion tells us nothing about the problems of trade-offs between the descendents of its different groups. Yet trade-off problems are inherent in the realm of ethics. Not so in morality, where there can be no trade-offs. Morality marks the boundary of the extent to which priority can be given to members of the ethical community.

The outcome is compatible with Donaldson and Dunfee's proposal (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), known as the integrative social contracts theory, which is in fact an attempt to combine communitarianism with universalism. Each company together with its stakeholders may be viewed as a community within which, according to our proposal, there would be ethical obligations towards the specific, near-by generations of its different stakeholders. In more general terms, there would be certain hypernorms of a moral type to avoid that the concern for these groups involve clear situations of radical evil for groups further remote in time. It is clear that other actors, such as governments and civil society organizations, play a very important role in keeping a vigilant eye over these moral limits. At any rate, business ethics would benefit from making this distinction between ethical and moral responsibilities towards nearby and remote future generations.

Closing

In this paper we have seen that moral thinking is useful and necessary when addressing environmental problems. The anthropocentric perspective that focuses on duties to future generations is the one that looks most promising to link environmental issues and business ethics. We argue that a distinction must be made between ethical and moral duties towards future generations. In our opinion, business ethics can build on the ethical duties towards the descendants closest to the stakeholders with which the company works and interacts. This is the case insofar as the company's relationship with these groups is seen to be building an ethical community, and insofar as the quality of life of the children and grandchildren is seen to form part of the interests and the legitimate expectations of the groups involved in the company's business. At the same time, an approach that addresses specific individuals that one knows or that one might get to know or could imagine, will always be more effective inside the company than an approach based on abstract concepts and realities unrelated to the company in time and space. Since the consequences of the environmental crisis will make themselves felt in the not-too-distant rather than (as was believed a few years ago) the remote future it also makes sense from this viewpoint to give priority to the people alive just after us.

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ⁱ The term “moral language” is the first sections in the general sense, as are the terms “amoral”, “removal of moral considerations” and “moral instinct”. We will distinguish between ethics and morality below.

ⁱⁱ Ecocentrism is one of the approaches that emphasises a moral approach to the natural environment. Although there are nuances between its different versions which we cannot analyse here, we can understand it as all the outlooks that attribute an intrinsic value to nature. From this perspective, approaches such as “environmental management”, “corporate environmentalism”, “eco-efficiency” and “reformist environmentalism” are criticised because, in the search for a balance between economic growth and environmental protection, they inevitably lower the bar of environmental aims or end up subordinating environmental concerns to economic concerns (Ehrenfeld, 1998). These approaches are considered to be not very honest (or possibly too naive) when they speak of a seamless, linear development towards environmental sustainability and create unrealistic, win-win expectations about the benefits of green strategies for both the environment and the company itself (Ehrenfeld, 1998; Newton, 2005; Prasad et al., 2005). When ecocentrics talk about management theory, they typically criticize the inability of the “prevailing paradigm of economic rationality” (Fergus, 2005) to move beyond small, superficial improvements in environmental matters (Shrivastava, 1995). This paradigm is often presented as the inevitable outcome of modern anthropocentrism (Purser, Park, & Montuori, 1995) and its dualisms between culture and nature, mind and body (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995). Many representatives of this current also call for an epistemological change or a change in the prevailing type of rationality, shifting from being instrumental to ecological (O’Riordan, 1995; Prasad et al., 2005; Stead & Stead, 2000). For others it is a matter of promoting a different view of the relationship between organisations and nature, a view that takes into account the “epic” outlook inherent in the theory of evolution, which is less anthropocentric, less mechanistic and based more on adaptation and interconnection than technorationalist views (Starkey & Crane, 2003).

At times, ecocentrism seems to entail a sacralisation of nature and life. It would be a mistake to hastily dismiss this as irrationalism. Sociologists have noticed the emergence of a sort of cosmic piety or eco-religion, and pointed out elements to understand this tendency (Giner & Tábara, 1999). Firstly, environmental changes, insofar as they may eventually affect the survival of humanity itself or at least insofar as they will surely affect some of its forms of life, have repercussions for what we understand to be rational action and a rational social order; and secondly, it is impossible to overlook humanity’s pronounced inclination for metaphorical and mythical thinking that offers a type of knowledge or practical guide particularly valued in the midst of great anxiety and uncertainty (Giner et al., 1999). These pose very profound questions that cannot be addressed in just a few lines but it must be remarked also that this tendency is not risk free. There are fears that adhering to this standpoint could cause other important values such as democracy or individual freedom to be questioned, reaching positions that have been dismissed as eco-fascist (Hopwood, Mellor, & O’Brien, 2005).

Ecocentric authors are confronted by other obstacles. The more they emphasise the radical nature of the change they posit, the more unlikely it seems that it will be able to become an integral part of today’s institutional and structural configuration. Without a sweeping political programme to implement it, ecocentrism may not develop into anything more than a feeble form of criticism because it is too pure and lacking in historical contextualization (Newton, 2005). Another criticism is that this perspective is often too quick to associate anthropocentrism with modernity, and both of them with instrumental reason and cornucopianism (the belief in continuous, boundless progress thanks to technology and abundant, natural resources). By conflating all these elements, the proposal might seem to suggest a return to earlier historical periods. Thirdly, ecocentrism criticises the dual nature of anthropocentrism which separates humanity from nature, and humanity from animals. The monism of ecocentrism may, however, be untenable because some sort of separation is necessary in order to condemn the human actions that damage nature or to achieve an aesthetic appreciation of nature. Most ecocentrics (and deep ecology in particular) posit that humanity is part of nature, i.e. is subordinated to a whole, whilst at the same time treating humanity as autonomous, which is why they can criticise human action and call for a change in behaviour. It is difficult to see how they can avoid ending up enmeshed in one of deepest puzzles in philosophy, the mind-body problem, i.e. the question how consciousness and intentionality can arise from material processes.

Finally, ecocentrics would need take some position concerning the view, which seems to follow from the Gaia theory among others, that claims that the Earth does not need to be saved: it will continue to exist and will find a new stability with a different climate and a different balance of species. What is at stake is not the planet's existence or the continuity of life but the type of climatic conditions, biodiversity, abundance of natural resources and water, etc, which make a certain forms of life for human beings possible and pleasant (Brand, 2009; Lovelock, 2006; Stead & Stead, 2009). The "Save the Earth!" slogan might be just another example of what some call "human chauvinism" because what we really mean is "let's save the things that make certain aspects of our lifestyle—our civilisation, if you prefer—possible". In short, whilst a less anthropocentric perspective might be necessary, some degree of human chauvinism might be inevitable. A completely non-anthropocentric perspective might become meaningless and be seen as somewhat irrational.

iii Ethical extensionism is defended from different philosophical perspectives such as utilitarianism and rights-based (Purser et al., 1995; Singer, 2002). It claims that some animals have inherent worth and hence are not inferior in value to human beings; or, put differently, that human beings cannot claim any superiority over some other animals. In this it is similar to ecocentrism, but usually it does not talk about nature as a whole. Instead it focuses on animals and emphasises the great deal we have in common with them rather than the differences; but it does not always grant this inherent worth to all animals. Its basis are the naturalist worldview of modern science, according to which humanity is not so much the crown of creation as yet another branch of the great tree of evolution. From this starting point, ethical expansionism recognises certain duties towards the individuals of species with certain traits in common with humans. Although this approach deserves a more in-depth consideration than is possible here, it must be pointed out that expansionism occupies a sort of middle ground between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism. But it could then be said that expansionism cannot escape from situating human beings in the centre, a centre from which is drawn a circle that encompasses more or less creatures. There is no consensus about the criterion used to define the boundary and grounds of expansion: priority can be given to the ability to feel or suffer (Singer, 1990), to self-consciousness or simply to being a living creature (Goodpaster, 1978). Yet, most versions of this approach posit an inherently individualistic position because they focus on individual biological organisms (usually mammals), rather than on broad, ecological entities such as species, habitats or ecosystems. This can be useful to tackle specific individual issues such as animal cruelty, but not for wider, virtually invisible issues such as global warming or species extension (Des Jardins, 1993). However, what worries us is often not an individual organism and creature but the future of a species or the relationship and balance between the species in an ecosystem. Consequently, one would need to evaluate how the ethical extensionism option can respond to the challenges posed by the environmental crisis with its many, interconnected aspects.

iv The Brundtland commission includes the imperative of "*not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". Such needs would include the possibility of living in a healthy environment, leading a healthy life and having natural spaces in a wild or virgin setting. This is also posited in the 1997 UNESCO declaration about the duties present generations have towards future generations, according to which "*present generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded*". It includes, inter alia, the duty of bequeathing a planet with no irremediable damage whilst also enabling future generations to choose their social, political and economic structures freely, respecting human rights and cultural diversity and safeguarding historical heritage. See: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.phpURL_ID=13178&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (last accessed: October 20th, 2009)

v Despite the difficulties involved, incipient examples of this type of approach are already emerging at the present time in companies that have a long-term view. One such case is MASISA, the Chilean forestry firm controlled by the Grupo Nueva. Although it does not yet have a committee for thinking about future generations, each facet of its management, such as the decision to build a factory, takes into account, inter alia, geophysical, geomorphological and meteorological considerations and the biodiversity on the site, in addition to variables related to society and human geography, such as nearby towns, regional income, job creation possibilities and services in the area. These studies are not static; rather, project managers – top executives – study what will happen in the future in order to determine, for example, when a factory should be relocated in order to cater for population growth or the saturation of the environmental load capacity in a given area, or even the education schemes that the future population will require in order to retrain the inhabitants of these communities in the future.

^{vi}The history of the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee in their own language, has been passed down by word of mouth. There are several versions of the Great Law, none of which can be said to be the true version (Snow, D. R. 1994. *Iroquois* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. p. 101). Not all of them refer to a seventh generation but “seventh-generation knowledge” may be said to exist (Snow, 1994, p. 109). The best-known versions of the Great Law say that the “*Five Nations shall labour, legislate and council together for the interest of future generations*” and advise that “*in all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self interest shall be cast into oblivion. Cast not over your shoulder behind you the warnings of the nephews and nieces should they chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law which is just and right. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground -- the unborn of the future Nation.*” <<http://www.indigenouspeople.net/iroqcon.htm>> (last accessed: October 20th 2009).