

Chapter 2

What Is Most Important of All?

This chapter begins in an unusual way with six thought-provoking exercises and questions. You may be interested in thinking through your own personal response to each of them before you read my response. Then you may find it interesting to compare your answers to mine.

1. What is of supreme value? Of everything in the universe (past, present, and future), what do you treasure and value beyond all else? What would you not want the universe to lose or give up for the sake of anything else?
2. Think of something that seems to you especially important. Then ask yourself, "But what is even more important? What is most important of all?" Continue this process until no further responses are possible because you have already reached what is of ultimate importance.
3. What is especially worth striving for? What should we, individually and together, pursue vigorously as our top goal or priority.
4. Much of your meaning and purpose in life probably comes from family, friends, love, work, vacations, enjoyment, learning, nature, personal growth, inner experiences, and other aspects of daily life. What additional sources in the universe, beyond those in your daily activities, provide you with a great deal of meaning and purpose?
5. Imagine for a few moments that you are a superbly wise and intelligent being with supernatural capacities. Right now you are contemplating the entire universe with its countless stars, planets, asteroids, life forms, and civilizations. You are also contemplating the future of all this, a future that will stretch over many eons. From this vast perspective of space and time, you ask yourself, "What is most important of all?"

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6. Imagine that anonymously giving up your life would somehow guarantee one thing in return (except your own life after death or your own reincarnation). Imagine that if you agree to this, you will die of apparently natural causes about two weeks later. You can choose the one thing that is guaranteed in return. For example, it could be the success or flourishing of any project, organization, cause, mission, or nation that you wish. It could be the flourishing of human civilization for centuries to come. Would you agree to give up your life for some such noble cause? What is the one thing that you would ask for in return?

For me, all six of these exercises and questions lead to the same answer. What is most important of all is *the continued existence and flourishing of human civilization*. The continuation of humanity, society, and culture. The never-ending flow of people, events, and changes that make up the total human mosaic. The continuing unfolding of human history in reasonably positive directions. No other goal, value, or priority is more important.

My view certainly does not intend to downplay the importance and value of our civilization *today*. On the contrary, my view emphasizes the never-ending flow of human history and culture, the continuous unfolding of the human drama through countless scenes and acts that stretch from the remote past to the distant future. The well-being, knowledge, compassion, and quality of life of people alive today are just as important as those of people alive at any given time in the future-but not more important.

Also, my view does not intend to downplay the importance and value of the planet earth, our fellow creatures on that planet, nor other portions of our natural environment. On the contrary, these will all be emphasized in chapter 6. My hiking has included mountains, forests, deserts, volcanoes, and deserted beaches in various parts of the world. I treasure the survival and flourishing of a wide spectrum of nonhuman life forms on this planet. These various plants, trees, animals, birds, and fish have very high value in themselves (regardless of whether they are useful to humankind or not). We should certainly avoid excessive interference in the nonhuman world, perhaps even reducing the size of the human population in order to allow other life forms to flourish. Indeed, I could readily accept the continued existence and flourishing of all life on earth (including human civilization, of course) as an appropriate answer to the six questions at the beginning of this chapter.

I do not agree with the view that each form of nonhuman life is equal in value and importance to human life. For me, the unceasing stream of human culture and civilization is somewhat more important than any other single species. Although I hope that we can live in harmony with dolphins

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and elephants forever, I admit that I would choose humanity's flourishing over theirs if I were forced to make a choice. Despite all our flaws and errors, we are the one species that has developed music, art, high intelligence, sophisticated languages, mathematics, computers, print, extensive written knowledge about the world, and powerful technological capacities. If we were somehow faced with the unpleasant choice of letting all of these achievements vanish or letting the whales become extinct, how many of us would really choose to let our own culture and species vanish forever?

Facing such choices in our imagination can help us clarify our values. Fortunately, with sufficient effort and caring, we should never have to face such unpleasant choices in real life. The ideal is to view ourselves as an integral part of life on earth, not as separate nor as somehow “above it all,” and to live harmoniously with whales, dolphins, birds, fish, apes, elephants, and other animals. It is certainly appropriate to love and even revere nature and natural processes. We can treasure nature because it provides us with beauty and inspiration as well as practical benefits. We can value nature as an end in itself; we can feel piety and respect toward all life forms.

A remarkable diversity of intelligent beings and civilizations may be flourishing in other parts of our Milky Way galaxy and in other galaxies throughout the universe. Their continuing existence and development are presumably as important as our own civilization, at least from the perspective of a being who is contemplating the entire universe. If they communicate with one another, the resulting storehouse of cumulative knowledge could also be of extraordinary importance. At present, though, we have no firm evidence that such civilizations exist nor that they have had any sort of contact with anyone on earth. For all practical purposes, then, the flourishing of humanity and our own planet is most important of all, at least until contact is established with some other civilization in the galaxy.

A brief summary. From the most comprehensive perspective of all, the development and flourishing of good, wise, intelligent, insightful, compassionate, advanced life (and culture and knowledge) throughout the universe is of supreme value. From our own standpoint at present, as one instance of such life, the continued flourishing of our own human civilization is of supreme importance.

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Why Should We Care About the Next 40 Years, Not Just the Next Few Months?

It is very important for our civilization to continue dealing effectively with immediate problems and opportunities. During the next few days and weeks, we have to continue taking appropriate actions to contain armed violence in various parts of the world, to feed the hungry, to care for the sick and wounded, to protect our environment, and to foster the most promising ventures and directions.

It is also very important, though, to adopt a longer time horizon than just a few months or years. When we talk about “the continued existence and flourishing of human civilization” we mean its flourishing not only during the next few months but also 30 or 40 years from now, even centuries from now. If we truly care about humanity's continuing flourishing, we will care about how well things proceed and unfold over the next few decades and beyond. We will act now in ways that enhance humanity's well-being over the next four months and the next four decades. Both time horizons are important.

During the next few months, should we temporarily ameliorate the worst poverty and hunger in a given area or group? Alternatively, should our efforts and resources be devoted to changing certain root causes so that the same area or group will experience much less poverty and hunger 30 years from now? The most sensible balance of our efforts will pay attention to both of these time horizons, neglecting neither the immediate-future needs of today's populations nor the longer-term needs of those same people and their children.

Why should our civilization care today about the next 40 years, not just the next few months? Why should those of us who are alive today bother making efforts and sacrifices for the sake of the people who will be alive 40 years from now? In addition to the earlier exercises and discussion in this chapter, several other perspectives and reasons point up the importance of caring about the next 40 years and even beyond. Here are 13 of these perspectives.

1. Many of us alive today will still be alive 40 years from now. This includes some of today's friends and neighbors, to say nothing of our children and grandchildren. So we are talking about our own world 40 years from now, and the world of several individuals

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whom we care about today, not just some abstract concept unconnected with today's reality.

2. Within the broader perspective of our entire civilization, too, the future is very real rather than merely an abstract concept. Forty years from now, several billion real people will be alive, pursuing their lives and loves, eating and sleeping, learning and thinking, reflecting and wondering, experiencing and feeling, working and playing. Like us, they will have favorite places, fascinating conversations, meaningful rituals, significant institutions, and creative arts. Some of them will study our particular period of history with great devotion and interest, speculating on why we followed the paths we did, asking themselves why we made certain wise choices and certain foolish ones, admiring us for some of our insights and initiatives.
3. If we could ask the people alive 40 or even 100 years from now what they consider most important of all, they would probably support the answer given earlier in this chapter. It seems likely that this answer is an enduring value.
4. If our future is highly negative, then most other values and goals will lose their point. No other goals are more important than humanity's survival at a satisfactory level. There is a terrible irony here. If most of us pursue priorities other than humanity's survival, we may end up losing these personal priorities along with everything else. If humanity goes out of existence or back to the caves, then our personal efforts and achievements also disappear. Career success, national prestige, battlefield victories, business as usual, books, paintings, and children will not provide any of us with long-lasting benefits if human civilization destroys itself.
5. Caring about our next 20-40 years is no longer unusual for individuals or even governments. Although it is still far from complete, scientific knowledge about population growth and long-term environmental changes has recently increased rapidly. More and more citizens and politicians are becoming aware of that scientific knowledge and the array of potential futures open to us. More and more people are becoming concerned with the future of our planet and civilization, or at least of their own country. Many people now realize that what people do in the next few years will

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greatly affect the world (and the happiness and well-being of people) 40 years from now, for better or worse.

6. Caring about the future of human civilization can help us avoid catastrophic consequences. Such consequences could occur if we ignore the future, fail to make the necessary changes and efforts and sacrifices, and simply let things turn out as they will. There is a serious possibility that human civilization might actually cease to exist.
7. Our links with the past can sharpen and reaffirm our links with the potential future. When I walk around the buildings and sites of 2000-year-old civilizations, listen to 200-year-old music, or look at my grandfather's paintings on my walls, I am reminded of the persistent flow of human history. The future seems real, important, and hopeful. We need not feel that society and culture 40 years from now are unduly remote, incomprehensible, or unreal.
8. Our civilization has been built up gradually over a very long period of time. Human culture has been transmitted from one generation to the next for at least 300 generations. Conserving and adding to this treasured legacy is of supreme importance. Risking its loss is unfair to past, present, and future generations.
9. The universe is roughly 15,000,000,000 years old and will be capable of sustaining life for at least that many years into the future. Within this perspective, it would be tragic if human civilization lasted for only a few thousand years and then perished or regressed. It has the capacity to flourish for the next million years or longer. In our galactic corner of the universe, humanity is too precious, too young, too full of potential to be allowed to languish at this stage in its development.
10. Some people gain significant meaning from feeling part of humanity's enduring drama. This unfolding drama encompasses all cultures spread over the entire planet. It sweeps from the distant past through the present and onwards to an unknown future. Being alive at a particularly exciting and critical period in human history can enhance the meaning that we gain from being involved in this great adventure. Humanity's future is an unfolding aspect of reality. Although the long-term future cannot be known at present, we do know that some sort of future will occur. We can picture

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various possibilities, ranging from a nuclear holocaust to a joyful utopia. The hopes, fears, and other emotions that we experience when we contemplate these potential future realities can provide highly significant meaning and purpose for us. Some people feel a great love for all humanity, feel strongly connected to it, and care deeply about its ultimate destination.

11. In addition, some people gain meaning and purpose from their efforts to *contribute* to the future development of humankind. Not content merely to be swept along as spectators, they actively participate in building a positive future for at least one portion of humanity. They oppose destructive, harmful, evil forces. They align themselves with the ideas, movements, and forces that are especially likely to lead to a reasonably positive future.
12. I find that the flourishing of human civilization over the next 40 years holds a significant place in both my reason and my passions. My head and my heart agree on this priority. I am sometimes deeply moved and joyful when loving behavior, effective projects, recent progress, or triumphant music gives me a sense of just how positive our future could be. Asked one day what provides meaning and purpose in life for me, I wrote, “To be part of the never-ending unfolding of human and cosmic history, and to contribute to it constructively.” Working toward a positive human future can be a supremely challenging and exhilarating adventure.
13. At times, when I fully experience just how grim our future might be, I feel appalled, sad, scared, despairing, enraged. In places as far apart as Greece, Nepal, China, California, and northern Ontario, I sense how easily we can spoil that which is beautiful, harmonious, and beneficial. During experiences as diverse as reading the gloomiest futures literature and noticing individual hurtful behavior, I catch vivid glimpses of what might happen to human civilization. It then seems obvious to me that we must increase tenfold our efforts to avoid such a fate.

Support from Other Writers

Many writers, in various ways, support the importance of human civilization continuing to exist and flourish for many more decades. Let us

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turn now to several of these writers. First, however, this is a good time to apologize for the fact that a few of the quotations chosen for this book contain sexist language. I find such language inappropriate and distasteful. After much thought, however, I have decided that it is better to include the quotations as they were originally written rather than to tamper with them or reject them.

Probably the most eloquent and passionate plea for taking the future of human civilization seriously is a book by Jonathan Schell (1982). He points out that our civilization, built up over thousands of years, can be eliminated within a few minutes by the nuclear weapons that are already in place, poised on a hair trigger. "That so much should be balanced on so fine a point-that the fruit of four and a half billion years can be undone in a careless moment-is a fact against which belief rebels. And there is another, even vaster measure of the loss, for stretching ahead from our present are more billions of years of life on earth, all of which can be filled not only with human life but with human civilization. The procession of generations that extends onwards from our present leads far, far beyond the line of our sight, and, compared with these stretches of human time, which exceed the whole history of the earth up to now, our brief civilized moment is almost infinitesimal. And yet we threaten, in the name of our transient aims and fallible convictions, to foreclose it all" (pp. 181-182). Several other portions of Schell's powerful book also support the importance of making deep changes today in order to enhance our prospects for continued flourishing. Incidentally, we certainly have not yet eliminated the extraordinary risk of nuclear warfare, as we will see in chapter 6.

Roger Sperry (1986, pp. 420-421) has written about "a reverent respect" for "the creative forces of evolving nature, including, of course, human nature in its cultural as well as biological aspects." When we combine appropriate values with this scientific base, "the kind of moral code that emerges would make it not merely unwise but basically immoral, even sacrilegious, to plan and build for nuclear annihilation, to pollute, to deplete irreplaceable resources, to thoughtlessly eradicate other species, and so on, or in any way to mindlessly despoil the quality of the biosphere for future generations. A strong moral basis emerges for population controls, for environmental protection, and for other measures and policies that would serve to ensure and enhance the long-term quality of this-world experience." When conflict arises, "then a higher standard for resolving right and wrong is needed and becomes the quality of existence as perceived in a broad long-term evolutionary...perspective."

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A book on environmental justice compares our generation to the trustees of an estate. “We are all in a position to be helpful (or harmful) to members of future generations, because we currently affect the earth on which they will depend for their survival. Through no fault of our own, and whether we like it or not, our relationship to them is analogous to what lawyers call a fiduciary relationship. We can conserve the earth's resources, and develop and use technologies that preserve natural balances, or we can do otherwise and leave them in ruin. We are like trustees of an estate that they will inherit (if we do not prevent them from existing altogether). Their unescapable dependence upon us is the basis of our obligations concerning them” (Wenz, 1988, p. 333).

The psychological and emotional importance of humanity's future can be forcefully brought home to us by a simple thought experiment (Partridge, 1981, p. 205). Suppose we knew with certainty that all human life and traces will be obliterated 200 years from now by our sun becoming a supernova. This knowledge would profoundly affect our feelings and behavior even though no one whom we know and love in our lifetime would die in the explosion. “We might ask *why* this obliteration is so dreadful to contemplate. We *need* not care personally, and yet we *do* care. We are not indifferent to the fate of future persons unknown and unknowable to us, or to the future career of institutions, species, places, and objects that precede and survive our brief acquaintance thereof.... We wish to perceive ourselves in the stream of history not only as recipients of a culture and tradition but also as builders of the future.”

Speaking to the World Congress of Philosophy in 1988, Sir Karl Popper rejected the notion that causes are all in the past and that the past is “driving us with kicks into the future.” The open future is actively present at every moment “almost as a promise, as a temptation, as a lure.” He concluded that “it is not the kicks from the back, from the past, that *impel* us, but the attraction, the lure of the future and its attractive possibilities, that *entice* us: that is what keeps life-and, indeed, the world-unfolding.”

The immediate significance of the future, and of our images of the future, has been expressed by Kenneth Boulding (1966, p. 11). “It is always a little hard to find a convincing answer to the man who says, ‘What has posterity ever done for me?... Why should we not maximize the welfare of this generation at the cost of posterity?... The only answer to this, as far as I can see, is to point out that the welfare of the individual depends on the extent to which he can identify himself with others, and that the most satisfactory individual identity is that which identifies not only

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with a community in space but also with a community extending over time from the past into the future.... This whole problem is linked up with the much larger one of the determinants of the morale, legitimacy, and 'nerve' of a society, and there is a great deal of historical evidence to suggest that a society which loses its identity with posterity and which loses its positive image of the future loses also its capacity to deal with present problems, and soon falls apart."

Partridge (191, pp. 204, 217, 218) has pointed out that healthy well-functioning human beings have a basic and pervasive need to transcend themselves; that is, to identify themselves as part of larger, ongoing, and enduring processes, projects, institutions, and ideals. This need for self-transcendence leads people to further the well-being, preservation, and endurance of communities, locations, causes, artifacts, organizations, and ideals that are outside themselves and that they hope will flourish beyond their own lifetimes. Also, it is no small ingredient in the production of great works of art and literature-and in the choice of careers in public service, education, and scientific research. "Posterity may extend profound favors for the living. For posterity exists as an *idea*, a potentiality, and a valid object of transpersonal devotion, concern, purpose, commitment. Without this idea and potentiality, our lives would be confined, empty, bleak, pointless, and morally impoverished. In acting for posterity's good we act for our own as well."

Posterity's importance in our own life is also emphasized in these sentences from MacLean's chapter in MacLean and Brown (1983, p. 193): "If we were to learn that the world would end with our death, this would have the profoundest effect on our lives and our valued projects. Posterity is important for giving meaning to our lives. It matters simply because the world matters. If we fail to take this interest seriously, we erode the value of many of our extra-phenomenal outward-directed, meaning-producing values. These values now play an important part in most normal lives. To reduce that role would be to reduce the meaningfulness of human life."

A historian of the idea of progress concluded that belief in human civilization's progress has, for the most part, "been a benign intellectual influence-inseparable, as I have come to believe, from the crucial motivations, impulses, desires, and incentives which have been behind the extraordinary accomplishments of Western civilization.... The history of all that is greatest in the West-religion, science, reason, freedom, equality, justice, philosophy, the arts, and so on-is grounded deeply in the belief that what one does in one's own time is at once tribute to the greatness and

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indispensability of the past, and confidence in an ever more golden future.... I remain convinced that this idea of progress has done more good over a twenty-five hundred-year period, led to more creativeness in more spheres, and given more strength to human hope and to individual desire for improvement than any other single idea in Western history” (Nisbet, 1980, p. 8).

We can feel an almost tangible link to the future through our children, and through their children and grandchildren, for at least three generations. Some human cultures have traditionally thought ahead to the next seven unborn generations. For instance, a monthly news magazine called *Daybreak*, edited by North American Indians, is dedicated to “the seventh generation yet unborn” (Lyons, 1988).

We might also feel a tangible link to the future through our enduring creations (such as a garden, sapling, book, or painting) and surroundings (such as a neighborhood, forest, or glacier). “Can we not reasonably rejoice in the prospect that future generations will preserve our writings in their libraries, perform our plays on their stages, and exhibit our art works in their museums? In other words, the foreseen activities of future generations relative to us and our interests may be seen to amount to a considerable benefit to us now” (E. J. Walsh, 1986, p. 106).

How Much Responsibility Do We Have To Future Generations?

In this chapter we have already noted several reasons for caring about humanity's well-being not only during the next few months, but also 40 years from now. If we accept the overarching importance of the continued flourishing of human civilization, we will behave today in ways that foster this flourishing for the next few decades and even beyond.

We come now to a conceptually precise question. Just how much responsibility do we have to the next few generations? Should we aim to give them opportunities and advantages that far exceed our own? Can we legitimately bequeath them a society and a planet that provide them with much less than our generation inherited? Or is some middle road the most appropriate?

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For me, the key concept is *equal opportunity* for all generations. Each future generation should have resources and opportunities that are approximately equal to those of our generation.

In some ways we will inevitably leave future generations worse off than we are. We will use up certain irreplaceable resources, leave certain toxic and radioactive wastes for them to cope with, and bequeath to them some problems and debts worse than our own. To counterbalance these, we must also leave future generations better off in certain other ways, such as fresh goals and solutions, flourishing institutions, enhanced knowledge and technology, more efficient agriculture, better ways of making global and regional decisions, reduced prejudice and discrimination, and reduced emphasis on the military and on armed violence. Just to select a few more examples from the multitude of possibilities, we could aim for a world in which solar power and sustainable organic farming are widespread, population growth has virtually ceased, food and opportunity are much more equally distributed than now, war is considered absolutely unacceptable regardless of the provocation (except in true self-defense), and virtually no nuclear or biological weapons remain in existence. The net inheritance, taking into account all the positive and negative things that we leave for future generations, must be at least equal to what our generation inherited from our forebears. We must play fair with future generations, not shortchange them.

In discussing justice between generations, Brian Barry (1978, p. 243) has stated that “equality of opportunity has to be taken in sufficiently broad terms. What justice requires, I suggest, is that the overall range of opportunities open to successor generations should not be narrowed. If some openings are closed off by depletion or other irreversible damage to the environment, others should be created (if necessary at the cost of some sacrifice) to make up.” Although it may be difficult to apply the concept of equal opportunity precisely in all situations, it may be quite easy to identify certain cases (past or future) in which the concept is clearly violated.

It is clear that certain things we do today can greatly affect the next few generations, for better or worse. We should emphasize getting safely through the next few decades without unduly hurting our chances for the decades beyond that. We should not build up large depletions or debts that will unduly harm the opportunities of the next few generations, and we should reduce those that have already occurred. We all know that if we do not fix a leaky roof or keep our financial debts in line with our personal income, we eventually pay a high price. Our well-being is based on

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resources, knowledge, and institutions left for us by past generations: it is only fair that we in turn bequeath an adequate base to future generations.

We would be wise to handle all of today's needs and problems within the overriding principle that we should not mortgage or discount the future, we should not give future generations fewer opportunities and resources than we have had. The principle of equal opportunity applies to future generations as well as across humanity today. Solving today's problems and wants by stealing from future generations is foolish, unfair, and unacceptable. No short-term goal of ours should jeopardize their chances of having an adequate level of happiness and well-being. Their well-being is just as important as ours. A society, like an individual, must resist the urge to live only for the moment and to consume everything in sight regardless of future consequences.

The idea of equal opportunity for future generations has been supported in two ways by Edward Joseph Walsh (1986). First he examined the principles of justice generally accepted in the case of coexisting groups. "In dealing with such coexisting groups, the presumption of equality seems more and more recognized in recent decades. Just as such considerations as race, sex, and religion are now seen as poor excuses for unequal treatment, temporal location will more and more be seen as a poor excuse for unequal treatment of various generations" (p. 30).

Walsh also developed a community view of our responsibilities to future generations. He pointed out the existence of a continuing intergenerational community embracing the members of the present generation, the members of future generations, and possibly the members of past generations. What we owe to people who will be alive in the long-term future flows from our membership in this intergenerational community. Accepting this responsibility is in our self-interest since it is through future generations that we achieve a kind of immortality: egoism and altruism converge (p. 101). Walsh ends his extended discussion with the hope that "perhaps we may live to see the day when a proponent of our community view may sit in the President's cabinet in Washington as Secretary for Future Generations!" (p. 195).

A concept of community was also elaborated by Care (1987). He described the concept with several different phrases: (a) a community of persons who may be at any temporal or social location and who nevertheless construe themselves as being in life together or sharing fate; (b) a sense of belonging to an unbounded community of human beings; (c)

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extended and unbounded shared-fate motivation; (d) a sense of common humanity because human beings belong together or are in life together irrespective of differences in time and location among them; (e) a sense of common humanity because of the fact that future *persons* may be hurt by what we do now.

The importance of equal opportunity for future generations was also supported by *Our Common Future*, the report of The World Commission on Environment and Development. Sustainable development is the report's central concept. In her foreword, Brundtland (1987, p. x) described the challenge that faced her in chairing this commission: "the challenge of facing the future, and of safeguarding the interests of coming generations."

We should strongly support equal opportunity for future generations as the *minimum* level of responsibility for which we should strive. In addition, it would be nice to make future generations even *better* off than we are if we could manage to do so. It would be nice if they could have opportunities and resources *superior* to those of our generation: this is a worthy goal for which many of us strive or hope. Indeed, many people over the centuries have proposed or assumed such progress as a goal for human civilization (although the idea of inevitable progress now seems naively optimistic to many of us). In a sweeping history of the idea of progress, for instance, Nisbet (1980) found that the development of civilization toward superior stages has usually been regarded as natural and inexorable. He claimed that the idea of progress "must be thought a part of the very scheme of things in universe and society: advance from inferior to superior must seem as real and certain as anything in the laws of nature" (p. 5).

Kant expressed a similar idea: "It will require a long, perhaps incalculable series of generations, each passing on its enlightenment to the next, before the germs implanted by nature in our species can be developed to that degree which corresponds to nature's original intention. And the point of time at which this degree of development is reached must be the goal of man's aspirations (at least as an idea in his mind), or else his natural capacities would necessarily appear by and large to be purposeless and wasted" (1970 translation, pp. 42-43).

In the past few years, however, the notion of inevitable progress has been viewed much less favorably. Many of us have shifted toward believing that holding our own may be about the best that we can hope for and realistically strive for. Hunger, local wars, guerilla and terrorist

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attacks, crime, acid rain, population growth, pollution, toxic and nuclear wastes, and environmental degradation have turned out to be tougher problems than we anticipated. In many of these struggles, we seem to be slipping backwards rather than gaining ground. Facing what has actually occurred in the past few years has made many of us rather sober, realistic, and even pessimistic about our ideal of bequeathing to the next three or four generations a better world than we ourselves inherited. After reading comprehensive assessments of the state of the world, such as Brown and other (1989), it is hard to feel much enthusiasm for our chances of achieving a bold new age or brave new world for the next unborn generation. Instead, it seems to me that we should put much of our effort into avoiding the worst catastrophes and into giving the next few generations an opportunity *equal* to ours. Our goal is to bequeath to them a civilization and a planet that are better than now in some ways while unfortunately worse in other ways. Justice requires that we not make our successors worse off, as Barry (1978, p. 244) has noted, whereas “making successors better off...is a nice thing to do but not required by justice.” Overall, let us hope that both our civilization and our planet several decades from now are at least equal to today.

An even longer-term view may be more optimistic. If we vigorously and successfully cope with some of the most severe global problems and risks during the next two or three decades, we may well bequeath a much better world than today to the seventh generation yet unborn. Achieving this for the first or second unborn generation, however, seems less probable. We will return to the question of probabilities in chapter 4.

Both of the stances just described (equal opportunity for future generations or something even better) are under severe attack from a third stance. This third stance is very widespread: it underlies much human behavior and even many statements. This third stance simply ignores or rejects most responsibilities to future generations. It puts today's “urgent needs” ahead of the needs and well-being of all unborn generations. We will spell out this stance in more detail in the next chapter. Extended philosophical discussions of the whole question of our responsibilities to future generations can be found in MacLean and Brown (1983), Partridge (1981), Sikora and Barry (1978), and Walsh (1986).

Two additional stances toward future generations have been delineated by Bayles (1978). One stance is mere survival: our only responsibility is to ensure that future generations survive and continue the species. Another stance, analogous to a welfare floor for individuals alive today, is to aim for

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a *minimum* level of well-being or quality of life for future generations. This minimum level could theoretically be well below the actual level of today's population. These two stances are worth noting in order to have a more complete picture of our options, but my own view is that they fall short of the level at which we should aim with vigorous efforts-the level of *equal* opportunity for future generations.