

What Has Posterity Ever Done for Me?

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Robert Heilbroner was for many years professor of economics at the New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of several books, including The Worldly Philosophers and Marxism: For and Against.

Heilbroner asks why we should care about future people or whether humanity survives into the distant future. Citing fellow economists who argue that we have no reason to sacrifice for the unknown future, Heilbroner expresses outrage at this callous disregard for future people. Admitting that he cannot give a rational argument for this view, he appeals to Adam's Smith's principle of sentient or inner conscience, which urges us to work for the long range survival of humanity.

Will mankind survive? Who knows? The question I want to put is more searching: Who cares? It is clear that most of us today do not care—or at least do not care enough. How many of us would be willing to give up some minor convenience—say, the use of aerosol, in the hope that this might extend the life of man on earth by a hundred years? Suppose we also knew with a high degree of certainty that humankind could not survive a thousand years unless we gave up our wasteful diet of meat, abandoned all pleasure driving, cut back on every use of energy that was not essential to the maintenance of a bare minimum. Would we care enough for posterity to pay the price of its survival? I doubt it. A thousand years is unimaginably distant. A century far exceeds our powers of empathetic imagination. By the year 2075, I shall probably have been dead for three quarters of a century. My children will also likely be dead, and my grandchildren if I have any, will be in their dotage. What does it matter to me then what life will be like in 2075, much less 3075? Why should I lift a finger to affect events that will have no more meaning for me seventy-five years after my death than those that happened seventy-five years before I was born?

There is no rational answer to that terrible question. No argument based on reason will lead me to care for posterity or to lift a finger on its behalf. Indeed, by every rational consideration, precisely the opposite answer is thrust upon us with irresistible force. As a Distinguished Professor of political economy at the University of London has written in the current winter issue of *Business and Society Review*:

“Suppose that, as a result of using up all the world's resources, human life did come to an end. So what? What is so desirable about an indefinite continuation of the human species, religious convictions apart? It may well be that nearly everybody who is already here on earth would be reluctant to die, and that everybody has an instinctive fear of death. But one must not confuse this with the notion that, in any meaningful sense, generations who are yet unborn can be said to be better off if they are born than if they are not.”

Thus speaks the voice of rationality. It is echoed in the book The Economic Growth Controversy by a Distinguished Younger economist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

“Geological time [has been] made comprehensible to our finite human minds by the statement that the 4.5 billion years of the earth’s history [are] equivalent to once around the world in an SST. . . . Man got on eight miles before the end, and industrial man got on six feet before the end. Today we are having a debate about the extent to which man ought to maximize the length of time that he is on the airplane.

According to what the scientists think, the sun is gradually expanding and 12 billion years from now the earth will be swallowed up by the sun. This means that our airplane has time to go round three more times. Do we want man to be on it for all three times around the world? Are we interested in man being on for another eight miles? Are we interested in man being on for another six feet? Or are we only interested in man for a fraction of a millimeter—our lifetimes?

That led me to think: Do I care what happens a thousand years from now? Do I care when man gets off the airplane? I think I basically [have come] to the conclusion that I don’t care whether man is on the airplane for another eight feet, or if man is on the airplane another three times around the world.”

Is it an outrageous position? I must confess it outrages me. But this is not because the economists’ arguments are “wrong”—indeed within their rational framework they are indisputably right. It is because their position reveals the limitations—worse, the suicidal dangers—of what we call ‘rational argument’ when we confront questions that can only be decided by an appeal to an entirely different faculty from that of cool reason. More than that, I suspect that if there is cause to fear for man’s survival it is because the calculus of logic and reason will be applied to problems where they have little validity, even as little bearing, as the calculus of feeling or sentiment applied to the solution of a problem in Euclidean geometry

If reason cannot give us a compelling argument to care for posterity—and to care desperately and totally—what can? For an answer, I turn to another distinguished economist whose fame originated in his profound examination of moral conduct. In 1759, Adam Smith published “The Theory of Moral Sentiments,” in which he posed a question very much like ours, but to which he gave an answer very different from that of his latter-day descendants.

Suppose, asked Smith, that “a man of humanity” in Europe were to learn of a fearful earthquake in China—an earthquake that swallowed up its millions of inhabitants. How would that man react? He would, Smith mused, “make many melancholy reflections about the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labors of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might product upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general.” Yet, when this fine philosophizing was over, would our “man of humanity” care much about the catastrophe in distant China? He would not. As Smith tells us, he would “pursue his business or his pleasure; take his repose for his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility as if nothing had happened.”

But now suppose, Smith says, that our man were told he was to lose his little finger on the morrow. A very different reaction would attend the contemplation of this “frivolous disaster.” Our man of humanity would be reduced to a tormented state, tossing all night

with fear and dread—whereas “provided he never saw them he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of hundred millions of his brethren.”

Next, Smith puts the critical question: Since the hurt to his finger bulks so large and the catastrophe in China so small, does this mean that a man of humanity, given the choice, would prefer the extinction of a hundred million Chinese in order to save his little finger? Smith is unequivocal in his answer. “Human nature startles at the thought,” he cries, “and the world in its greatest depravity and corruption never produced such a villain as would be capable of entertaining it.”

But what stays our hand? Since we are all such creatures of self-interest (and is not Smith the very patron saint of the motive of self-interest?), what moves us to give precedence to the rights of humanity over those of our own immediate well-being? The answer, says Smith, is the presence within us all of a “man within the beast,” an inner creature of conscience whose insistent voice brooks no disobedience: “It is the love of what is honorable and noble, of the grandeur and dignity, and superiority of our own characters.”

It does not matter whether Smith’s eighteenth-century view of human nature in general or morality in particular appeals to the modern temper. What matters is that he has put the question that tests us to the quick. For it is one thing to appraise matters of life and death by the principles of rational self-interest and quite another to take responsibility for our choice. I cannot imagine the Distinguished Professor from the University of London personally consigning humanity to oblivion with the same equanimity with which he writes of its demise. I am certain that if the Distinguished Younger Economist from M.I.T. were made responsible for determining the precise length of stay of humanity on the SST, he would agonize over the problem and end up by exacting every last possible inch for mankind’s journey.

Of course, there are moral dilemmas to be faced even if one takes one’s stand on the “survivalist” principle. Mankind cannot expect to continue on earth indefinitely if we do not curb population growth, thereby consigning billions or tens of billions to the oblivion of non-birth. Yet, in this case, we sacrifice some portion of life-to-come in order that life itself may be preserved. This essential commitment to life’s continuance gives us the moral authority to take measures, perhaps very harsh measures, whose justification cannot be found in the precepts of rationality, but must be sought in the unbearable anguish we feel if we imagine ourselves as the executioners of mankind.

This anguish may well be those “religious convictions,” to use the phrase our London economist so casually tosses away. Perhaps to our secular cast of mind, the anguish can be more easily accepted as the furious power of the biogenetic force we see expressed in every living organism. Whatever its source, when we ask if mankind “should” survive, it is only here that we can find a rationale that gives us the affirmation we seek.

This is not to say we will discover a religious affirmation naturally welling up within us as we careen toward Armageddon. We know very little about how to convince men by recourse to reason and nothing about how to convert them to religion. A hundred faiths contend for believers today, a few perhaps capable of generating that sense of caring for human salvation on earth. But, in truth, we do not know if “religion” will win out. An appreciation of the magnitude of the sacrifices required to perpetuate life may well tempt us to opt for “rationality—to enjoy life while it is still to be enjoyed on relatively easy

terms, to write mankind a shorter ticket on the SST so that some of us may enjoy the next millimeter of the trip in first-class seats.

Yet I am hopeful that in the end a survivalist ethic will come to the fore—not from the reading of a few books or the passing twinge of a pious lecture, but from an experience that will bring home to us, as Adam Smith brought home to his “man of humanity,” the personal responsibility that defies all the homicidal promptings of reasonable calculation. Moreover, I believe that the coming generations, in their encounters with famine, war, and the threatened life-carrying capacity of the globe, may be given just such an experience. It is a glimpse into the void of a universe without man. I must rest my ultimate faith on the discovery by these future generations, as the ax of the executioner passes into their hands, of the transcendent importance of posterity for them.