

# Do We Owe the Past a Future? Reply to Finneron-Burns

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*Abstract.* According to the Unfinished Business Account, if actor  $p$  reasonably judges performing a supererogatory act  $\varphi$  at great sacrifice to herself will enable beneficiary  $q$  to achieve a greater good, then failure to promote the good made possible by  $\varphi$  wrongs  $p$ . Elizabeth Finneron-Burns questions whether it follows that we have a duty to render the sacrifices of past (and present) people more worthwhile by preventing human extinction. This note responds to her criticisms.

Elsewhere, we proposed the Unfinished Business Account. It states that if actor  $p$  reasonably judges performing a supererogatory act  $\varphi$  at great sacrifice to herself will enable beneficiary  $q$  to achieve a greater good, then failure to promote the good made possible by  $\varphi$  wrongs  $p$  (Kaczmarek and Beard 2020, 202). Elizabeth Finneron-Burns questions whether it follows that we have a duty to render the sacrifices of past (and present) people, from which we benefited, more worthwhile by preventing human extinction. She develops two lines of criticism. First, she maintains that one cannot derive obligations from worthwhileness. Second, she argues that we beg the question by assuming that future people would be benefited if caused to exist and have a good life. This note responds to her criticisms.

## 1 | On Trust and Worthwhileness

Our suggestion was that when one person makes a sacrifice for another person's good, they entrust that person with a duty to get as much value as possible from their sacrifice (Kaczmarek and Beard 2020, §2). Finneron-Burns raised two arguments against this claim, which we address in turn.

The first issue is that there may not even be *pro tanto* wrongness involved when one person, the beneficiary, does not do everything they could to maximise the benefits that were made possible by another person's sacrifice. Specifically, Finneron-Burns denies that acting in this way violates any kind of trust since trust requires prior agreement between the parties involved (Finneron-Burns 2021, 6). Because no such agreement is possible between us and our forebears, it cannot be the case that we betray their trust by squandering the benefits made possible by their sacrifice. Finneron-Burns likens this to the case where I gift a million dollars to my neighbours in the hope they set up a college fund for their children. She claims that my neighbours do not betray my trust if they instead used this money to revamp their kitchen.

We interpret her case somewhat differently. My neighbours *do* betray my trust but they do so *with adequate justification*. I trusted them in the sense that, when I parted with my fortune, I expected that my neighbours would try to do what they ought to do, which was to make the most of my sacrifice. This sort of trust doesn't depend on prior agreement, and the wrong-making property is not acting contrary to my wishes but instead disregarding

the reasons that spring from my sacrifice. However, it is also true that, by forgoing such renovations for the benefit of their children's education, they would be making a sacrifice of their own, which it might be too much for me to ask them to make. Although they possess reason to set up the college fund, perhaps my neighbours also desperately crave a change of lifestyle, and so exercise their agent-centred prerogative to make their dream kitchen come true.

In general, when I leave "unfinished business" for others, I do so expecting them to be sensitive to moral reasons, and not to my wishes, dreams and hopes. One could, of course, question whether 'trust' is the right term for describing this sort of attitude taken towards duty-bearers. However, we take it that our main thought experiment, Liver Transplant, adequately demonstrated that common sense recognizes that certain sacrifices are reason-giving.<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to the second issue raised by Finneron-Burns. She maintains that, even if the source of the wrongness is a betrayal of trust, trust comes with limits. We recognized a number of such limits in the original paper; for instance, writing that "it is clearly not possible to oblige another person to accept a greater sacrifice than that which one originally accepted" and also that "if our obligations to the past are to play a decisive role in our moral choices, then they should be at least broadly in line with our long-term interests and consistent with our conception of the good life" (ibid, 202). As we understand them, these limits relate primarily to the size and nature of the costs that could be justifiably imposed on the duty-bearer in rendering their benefactor's sacrifice more worthwhile.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is what motivates our conclusion about Finneron-Burns' case involving the million dollar gift to one's neighbours.

Finneron-Burns, on the other hand, seems only to be interested in limits on our obligations based around whether we can render some sacrifice worthwhile or not, and thus wrap up the "unfinished business" handed down by the past. Her argument assumes the need for a clear cut off between sacrifices that are 'worthwhile' and 'not-worthwhile', and she interrogates various such cut-off points based on differing interpretations of what it means to 'realise the full benefits of the sacrifice'.

However, we see no obvious reason to commit to this binary framework. We suspect the disagreement between Finneron-Burns and us on this point stems, at least in part, from a mismatch in how the concept of 'worthwhileness' is being understood. Finneron-Burns writes that "The authors argue that a sacrifice is not morally worthwhile if the beneficiary fails to 'realise the full benefits of the sacrifice'" (Finneron-Burns 2021, 3). But that is not so. What we claimed was that a sacrifice would be *less* morally worthwhile than it might have otherwise been if its full benefits weren't realized by the duty-bearer. The worthwhileness of a given sacrifice is a matter of degree, and it would always be better (in a reason-implicating sense) if a sacrifice were rendered more worthwhile, no matter how worthwhile it may have already been made.

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<sup>1</sup> *Liver Transplant*: Through no fault of his own, Jeff is very sick. He desperately needs a liver transplant. Though he is not obliged to do so, a stranger called Michael gives Jeff part of his liver at the cost of reducing his own lifespan by ten years. After the procedure, Jeff drinks heavily, and he dies from cirrhosis four months later (Kaczmarek and Beard 2020, 200).

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Kamm refers to the costs that duties can justify imposing on the duty-bearer as the 'efforts standard', which she describes as being one of (at least) two dimensions of the normative strength of moral reasons alongside the 'precedence standard', which instead concerns the relative weights of duties when they clash. See (Kamm 1985).

One reason that Finneron-Burns might believe that worthwhileness is not a matter of degree, but a black and white notion, would be if she believes there is a direct connection between whether we can be obliged to secure benefits from past sacrifices (or, more crudely, whether it would be wrong for us not to realize them) and whether those sacrifices would be made worthwhile by our intervention.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the view that we hold. As rehearsed in the preceding paragraphs, to our minds, beneficiaries have obligations to the past when the reasons that flow from their benefactor's sacrifices are sufficiently strong and decisive, and that this will depend upon at least three things: (1) how worthwhile the sacrifice would be with or without our intervention, (2) the cost to the duty-bearer of intervening and (3) the degree of fit between such an obligation and our disposition to bare such burdens even if they are not obligatory. And so, we simply have no need for a sharp cut-off between worthwhile and not-worthwhile sacrifices but instead obtain unambiguous claims about obligation and supererogation from a non-binary notion of 'worthwhileness' combined with these other considerations.

However, Finneron-Burns' critical discussion did prompt us to consider situations where one or more conditions in the Unfinished Business Account might not hold. We have come to believe that our initial formulation may be too weak; it doesn't apply in cases where the benefactor chooses to give up more than could possibly be gained from that sacrifice. But it seems like perhaps it should. Wouldn't a beneficiary wrong a benefactor (if only non-decisively), even in the case where the upper-bound of value made possible by the benefit that could be achieved was less than the cost of their sacrifice, if the beneficiary still chose to waste that sacrifice for less benefit than it might have realized? Common sense tells us that such suboptimal sacrifices are at least permissible, and even honourable. After all, it's *my* good, and if I want to let another person catch a break, then common sense instructs that I should be permitted to do so (Lazar 2019; cf. Hurka and Shubert 2012; Sider 1993). We do not attempt that project here, but it does seem to be a promising place to dig in more.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 | On Begging the Question

In the second half of her paper, Finneron-Burns starts with the following observation. Since in our thought experiment, Liver Transplant, the benefit realized is a benefit to some individual, the benefit that is realized in the case they are concerned with, human extinction, should similarly, by analogy, be understood as a benefit that goes to some individual or thing. She proposes two accounts of who this beneficiary might be: 'humanity', in which case she says that the benefit must be cashed out as extending humanity's lifespan; or the people who might then come into existence with good lives in the future (Parfit 2017, 129).

On the first of these options, we submit that Finneron-Burns' claim about this benefit boiling down to longevity is too strong. Johann Frick, for instance, defends a richer notion of humanity's 'final value', which while understood to attach to the species as a

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<sup>3</sup> It may be that Finneron-Burns denies the very possibility of wrong-making properties featuring in acts that are all-things-considered permissible. But this seems awfully strong, and we hesitate to ascribe it to her. Most will agree that an aspect(s) of an action can be *pro-tanto* wrong even if the act itself is a permissible object of choice on balance, as set out in (Chappell 2021, §2.4).

<sup>4</sup> A quick-fix would be to replace "a greater" with "some" in our statement of Unfinished Business but there might be other complications.

whole, and constitute a reason for promoting human survival, is not merely reducible to the longevity of human existence. As he puts it:

Imagine a world in which each generation of humans dies and vanishes without trace before the next one is born.... Each new generation lives without knowledge of previous generations of humans. The human species survives in this scenario, but a lot of what we mean by ‘humanity,’ and a lot of what seems uniquely valuable about it—our sense of history, cultural traditions, relationships between parents and children, etc.—is lost (Frick 2017, 362-3).

Similarly, a single human existing for two billion years, might also contribute less to the final value of humanity than six billion people existing together over the next five thousand years, which is the very claim Finneron-Burns offers for rejecting her notion of benefitting ‘humanity’.

However, our main point of contention is with the second option, which Finneron-Burns correctly claims is the one that we are more sympathetic towards. She suggests our argument assumes that possible people can be benefited by being caused to exist and have a good life, and that doing so begs the question against our target audience.

It is certainly true that we assume that creating people with good lives is good for them. But does that beg the question against those who endorse the No Complainants Claim?

We think not. The overwhelming majority of moral theories aren’t expressly opposed to, let alone fundamentally incompatible with, the possibility of benefiting people by doing what is good for them, by causing them to exist and have a good life, even when this is not better for them.<sup>5</sup>

What’s more, this is true of moral theories within the No Complainants tradition, which states that an act cannot be wrong unless there is or will be someone whom this act wronged (Parfit 2017, 136). The philosophers crafting these theories have tended to pay little mind to existential benefits because they are concerned about whether anyone has a “complaint” and they believe these sorts of benefits cannot be the source of such complaints, because failing to provide them wrongs nobody. For such moral views, “it is enough to do nothing that would be bad for these people. We could achieve this moral aim in a purely negative way, by doing nothing” (Parfit 2017, 137). But notice that their rather stern (and, to Parfit’s mind, impoverished) focus on non-maleficence is consistent with the possibility of existentially benefiting.

Far more controversial is the follow-up claim, that existential benefits give rise to deontic directives. Our target audience, as set out in the paper, are those who accept the No Complainants Claim and thereby resist this further step. It would beg the question against this group to appeal to a moral reason to promote existential benefits. But we did no such thing. Rather, we simply claimed that the failure to produce such benefits could make certain harms from past sacrifices worse by making the sacrifices they were associated with less worthwhile. On the view we put forward, it is solely for the sake of the past people who made these sacrifices (and the complaints they might have against us) that we pursue a future wherein those sacrifices are made most worthwhile. In this way, we

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, we have elsewhere shown that Scanlon-style Contractualists aren’t fundamentally committed to their denial (Beard and Kaczmarek 2019).

were providing an argument for why certain benefits enjoyed by future people may be morally salient even to those who would reject standard arguments in favor of existential benefits being reason-implicating.

Our argument could still be said to beg the question against those who vehemently oppose the very possibility of an act being good for someone if it is not also better for her.<sup>6</sup> How worrisome is this for our project?

Not very. While the arguments advanced in support of the stronger view have some force, we venture that few will end up denying the possibility of existential benefits for two reasons.

Firstly, we standardly make sense of the wrongness of creating a miserable life by appealing to the corresponding notion of 'existential harm'.<sup>7</sup> If we think that this makes sense, as in fact most do, it seems *ad hoc* to insist that existential benefits are downright hokum (Harman 2009, 781-2).

Secondly, the stronger view appears to imply that the vast majority of those now alive have no reason to be grateful for, say, those who worked to prevent a nuclear exchange during the Cold War.<sup>8</sup> After all, had such a war occurred, many of us would not have been born, and thereby we cannot be said to be better off than we would have been had global war not been averted. Yet, we are grateful to these people, and this gratitude does not seem misplaced. The same can be said for the eradication of smallpox, the end of slavery in the Antebellum South and so forth. If not because these things were good for us, what might explain our gratitude?<sup>9</sup>

A more pressing question for our project is whether existential benefits can still give us non-moral reasons for acting. We believe that they can. Understanding that life could be wonderful, even if only because one recognises that it would be wonderful to live such a life, or that future humans could achieve some great goods, even if only because we recognise that these goods would be great, is all that it takes. Each of us can recognise these lives as wonderful and these goods as great. On its own, such bare recognition may not be enough to make these facts morally salient. However, what this recognition of the potential for wonderful future lives can still do is inspire us to want to bring about great goods in the future. And once we have been inspired to perform sacrifices that would contribute to bringing such futures into existence, then there are at least some beings who would be wronged, by rendering their sacrifices less worthwhile, if these futures are allowed to vanish along with our species.

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<sup>6</sup> That is, those who accept the Narrow Deontic Principle: an act cannot be wrong if it would be worse for no one (Parfit 2017, 119).

<sup>7</sup> But see (Bader 2022) for a rare exception.

<sup>8</sup> Such as Stanislav Petrov and Vasili Arkhipov, who disobeyed military orders to avert the firing of nuclear weapons during false alarms, or Bertrand Russell and other members of the committee of 100, who sought to get arrested as a tactic to raise awareness of the risks from nuclear weapons.

<sup>9</sup> In response, one could say that these things are absolutely good (or simply good). We don't find this move appealing, though others might. See especially Richard Kraut, who maintains that a thing can only be good *for someone* or good *of a kind* (Kraut 2011).

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