

**The Fallacy in Future Generations' Argument for Environmental  
Sustainability**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The importance of a healthy environment cannot be overemphasized since a healthy environment is not only fundamental to our own health but is also our life-support system. Surprisingly, the state of our environment today bears a sour testimony to destructive anthropogenic activities. It suffices us to argue that untamed human activities on the environment have led to the degradation and pollution of the air, water and land; thereby threatening the existence of life on the planet earth. In response, many environmentally concerned scholars have come up with different arguments aimed at solving, as well as checking the environment from the apparent current spate of deterioration. The most noticeable argument among all is the one that anchors its vehemence of environmental sustainability on the interest of future generations. Consequently, this paper argues that the quest for environmental sustainability would be more plausible and less controversial should the efforts centre more on the present generation of all organisms. This view is predicated on the fact that, as currently advanced, the future generations' argument is fallacious and cannot carry the burden of environmental sustainability that is predicated on it.

**Keywords:** **Environment, Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, Present Generation, Future Generation.**

## **1.0 The State of the Environment**

The state of the environment today cannot be fully comprehended if one fails to look at the idea of “pristine environment”. By pristine environment, we mean an environment that has not been subjected to anthropogenic influence. Preservationists are often at the vanguard of crusade for the protection of pristine environment. But then, some scholars believe strongly that the whole idea of pristine environment is deceptive and utopian since “we cannot find any site on earth that fits that description” (Y. Uggla, 2010:80). The notion of “pristine environment”, according to the latter, refers to a Judeo-Christian construct which only existed in the Garden of Eden - full of flowers, green vegetation, loveable animals etc (Genesis 1). As such, the antagonists of the notion of pristine environment conclude that nature and culture are inseparable, and whoever sees them as two separate entities simply exhibits sheer ignorance, since “our world is and always has been full of hybrids: socio-natural objects and subjects” (Uggla., 2010, 81).

Whether pristine environment does, or, does not exist, the state of the global environment today bears a testimony to destructive environmental practices and activities of humans. Again, this does not suggest that environmental abuse is limited to the present age. Curtis N. Runnels, for example, informs that “recent archeological work is changing a long-standing view of the impact of agriculture on the land in Greece” (Runnels, 1995: 96). The archeological research, he argues, has helped to dispel the view of “the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantics who saw the ancient Greeks as careful stewards of a land they held to be filled with gods” (96). Max Nicholson (1971: 10) also argues that “man’s impact on his environment goes back far beyond the beginning of history”.

Although Nicholson highlights the fact that humans have always influenced the environments in which they lived, some scholars insist that the current effect that humans have on the environment are due to “(1) increase in human population, (2) decline of ecosystems, (3) loss of biodiversity and (4) global climate change” (Wright and Boorse, 2011: 4, also cf. Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1991, Detwyler, 1971). For reasons of space constraint, these four significant global environmental problems will not be discussed in this paper, more importantly because they are predictably self-explanatory. Rather, the issue of environmental sustainability shall be discussed shortly.

### **1.1. On the Question of Environmental Sustainability**

Two schools of opinions have emerged, namely the anthropocentric and biocentric; the former school argues in favour of environmental sustainability from human interest, saying that our moral duties with respect to the environment are ultimately derived from the duties we owe to one another as human beings. The latter school maintains that our duties toward the earth's non-human forms of life are grounded on their status as entities possessing inherent worth (Taylor, 1986: 11-13). While the argument and counter-argument are going on, the observers of both schools are already in quandary, partly because the schools in question are not short of persuasive arguments to defend their respective positions. This shows that the camp of pro-environmental sustainability is not enjoying its desired tranquility since there is a divergence of opinion as regards the appropriate approach to environmental sustainability.

Also granted that the present paper aims at identifying and situating the apparent fallacy in “the future generations’ argument”, the other pressing question is: whose interest is the quest for environmental sustainability meant to serve? Or put plainly, is the quest for

environmental sustainability meant to serve the interest of the present generation or the future generations? This question is crucial and germane since many environmentalists, especially the green activists, anchor their call for environmental sustainability on the concept of intergenerational citizenship. In response to the question, and as said earlier, the position of the present paper is that the need for environmental sustainability should be based on the interest of the present generation of all organisms since the argument for the future generations is considered by this researcher as fallacious.

## **1.2 Sustainability and Environmental Sustainability Defined**

It is necessary to explain the meaning of “sustainability” and of “environmental sustainability”. Explaining sustainability concept may not be as easy as it appears, especially because sustainability permeates every spectrum of our life. Its relevance predates contemporary society since cultures, customs, traditions, lifestyles and education depend on the capacity to endure and survive over time. Some theorists cannot but add “sustainable” or “sustainability” as a significant component to their theories. For example, the concept of sustainable development can hardly be discussed about outside its three constituent parts, namely, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social-political sustainability. This underscores the protean nature of the concept of sustainability and why an all-embracing definition of sustainability remains problematic.

In the same vein, Robert Paehlke (2005: 37) agrees “with Newton and Freyfogle that there is not a fully shared understanding of the detailed meaning of sustainability and no universal agreement on what it is we wish to sustain.” As a result, Lynam Abigail

(Lynam, 2012) maintains that “sustainability is a values-based, moral concept, not simply a technical term.”

The import of Lynam and Paehlke’s position is that every definer of sustainability defines it from his or her value orientation which could be anthropocentric, biocentric or ecocentric inclined. Having made this point, basic fundamentals of sustainability will now be discussed. Costanza and Patten’s (1995: 193) elucidation of sustainability reveal that:

...the basic idea of sustainability is quite straight forward: a sustainable system is one which survives or persists. Biologically, sustainability means avoiding extinction and living to survive and reproduce. Economically, it means avoiding major disruptions and collapses, hedging against instabilities and discontinuities. Sustainability, at its base, always concerns longevity.

Kuhlman and Farrington (2010: 3441) define sustainability as “maintaining well-being over a long, perhaps even an indefinite period.” Robert Paehlke (2005: 36) argues, “... sustainability is centered on economics, public policy and ethics rather than on the biological sciences.” In the words of Paul Hawken, sustainability means the ability to “leave the world better than you found it, take no more than you need, try not to harm life or the environment, make amends if you do.” (at <http://yosemite.epa.gov>, assessed 23-04-2014) For Rosenbaum (1993: 34) “sustainability means using methods, systems and materials that will not deplete resources or harm natural cycles”.

Meanwhile, some environmentalists believe that no definition of sustainability can capture its essence, like the one given by the Brundtland commission in its attempt to define the concept of sustainable development. The commission defines sustainable

development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their needs” (Brundtland *et al*, 1987 45). The same commission goes further to add that “the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries - developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned” (Ibid., 45-46).

By drawing his inspiration from the commission’s definition, John Morelli (2011: 24) argues that his definition of environmental sustainability “is intended to help operationalize the concept of sustainability by providing more clarity of purpose and direction, particularly regarding the importance of valuing ecological services and recognizing our interconnectedness.” Therefore, Morelli (2011: 24) defines environmental sustainability as,

... meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them, ...and more specifically, as a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity.

In the same vein, Philip Sutton (2004:1) defines environmental sustainability as “the ability to maintain the qualities that are valued in the physical environment.” Environmental sustainability also can be seen as the maintenance of the factors and practices that contribute to the quality of environment on a long-term basis. According to Ying Z. Zhou (2010: 17), environmental sustainability is “the practice that ensures biodiversity, clean air, water and land, emission reductions, and carrying capital remains are balanced to conserve and recycle resources, and reduce waste”.

Having settled the issue of the fundamentals of sustainability and environmental sustainability, the earlier question still subsists, which is; whose interest is the quest for environment sustainability meant to serve?

#### **1.4 The Anatomy of Future Generations' Argument**

From the point of view of future generations' argument, environmental sustainability would be achievable only when we begin to realize that the natural resources in our environment do not belong to the present generation alone. This means that it is imperative that the present generation of humans preserve the environment for future generation, because the latter has as much right to the resources of nature as the present generation. This position is made manifest in the green party's axiom, which says that "we don't inherit the planet from our parents - we borrow it from our children" (Narveson, 2007:6). In the same token, Edith Brown Weiss (1996: 601) argues that,

...in all we do, we inherently represent not only ourselves but past and future generations. We represent past generations ... because we embody what they passed on to us. We represent future generations because the decision we make today affect the well-being of all persons who come after us and the integrity and robustness of the planet they will inherit.

Buchanan (2009: 1237) corroborates this idea when he opines that, "every decision that we make today can either directly or indirectly affect the interests of future generations, both those generations already born and those to be born in the decades and centuries after we are gone".

In a nutshell, the plea of the advocates of the future generations' argument is encapsulated in Postma's (2006:13) profound statement:



... we should imagine ourselves as citizens of a world community stretching out over several generations with whom we are to share the natural resources that are conditional on our survival and well-being. This ideal of intergenerational citizenship requires us to reconsider our present use and exploitation of natural resources, measured against the standards provided by hypothetical claims of future people; those unknown people with whom we do not share and will not share a common life.

In a view similar to Postma (1993, 1041), A. Tough (1997: 707–713) at different times reiterates the same intergenerationist line of thought. One of his stronger arguments suggests that:

If we could see humanities many decades from now, we could see peoples of all ages playing, working, talking, building, leaning, laughing, crying, loving. We call these people 'future generations'. This is not some abstract and meaningless concept: at any given time in the future, actual people will actually exist. They will be living busy lives on earth or elsewhere in our galaxy, not just in someone's imagination. If these people of the future could speak to us in order to influence our perceptions, values and actions, what would they say? What do they need from us?

Therefore, Ernest Partridge (2001: 378) warns, "in our hands lies the fate, for better or worse, of future persons whose lives we will never share."

From the foregoing, the message that is explicated in the future generations' argument is crystal clear. The message, in this context, supports the idea that the present generation of human beings should be mindful of the way and manner they consume natural resources, because the survival of some human beings would definitely depend on them (these resources) in the future. Therefore, to make life comfortable for the people of the future, the present generation of humans needs to put the interest of future generation side by side their own in order to ensure equity and justice, and to attain environmental sustainability. It is at this juncture that the intended or unintended

“fallacy” being committed by the proponents of future generation’s argument will be addressed.

#### **1.4.1 The Fallacy in Future Generations’ Argument**

No doubt, the future generations’ argument is largely persuasive and infectious. On a deeper reflection, however, one cannot but discern its basic weakness. What makes the argument shallow and faulty is the fact that it commits an existential fallacy. As Copi and Cohen (2007:138) rightly put it, “a fallacy is a type of argument that may seem to be correct, but that proves, on examinations, not to be so.” Hence, an existential fallacy is committed when the claim of an argument or of a proposition does not correlate with observable object(s) of some kind, or, when a conjectured scenario is taken as the fact. Besides, existential fallacy occurs when we presuppose that a class has members when it is advisedly wrong to do so. Therefore, it is advisable that to ground a viewpoint that has such monumental consequences for humanity, the proponents must avoid obvious errors in reasoning which will weaken the position canvassed.

In the same light, many logicians have argued in favour of George Boole’s square of opposition, instead of Aristotle’s own. This happens because Boole’s square of opposition holds that **A** and **E** propositions have no existential import while **I** and **O** propositions do. For instance, an **A** proposition like “all humans are mortal” and an **E** proposition like “no humans are mortal” are without existential import as far as Boole is concerned. The first one is a universal affirmative proposition while the second is a universal negative proposition. However, “a proposition is said to have existential import if it typically is uttered to assert the existence of objects of some kind.” (Copi and

Cohen, 2007: 203). **A** and **E** propositions lack existential import because “they do not assert anything about any individuals”(Jagat,1989: 305), unlike **I** and **O** propositions.

Consequently, future generations’ argument commits existential fallacy, because the subject matter of the argument lacks existence as far as human existence is concerned. This is because a person needs to be born in order to lay claim to existence. And if this is so then future generations’ argument is tantamount to Descartes’ ontological argument for the existence of God; an argument that has been heavily criticized and repudiated by many thinkers. What further weakens the future generations’ argument is the claim that the present generation owes a duty to protect and manage the environment for future generation, as if the hypothetical future people will reciprocate the same gesture to the present generation.

In this paper, we insist that the existence of future generation is not a necessary one; rather it is contingent upon the present generation. The present generation does not owe the supposedly future people any duty to bring them into existence. After all, procreation is a matter of choice for those who are naturally endowed to procreate. In the same vein, there are human beings who would never procreate as a result of the design of nature or what have you. For this last set of humans, future generations’ argument for environmental sustainability may appear offensive.

It is on the basis of the foregoing analysis that we reiterate our argument that the quest for environmental sustainability would be more plausible and less controversial if it revolves around the lives of present generation of all organisms. Our submission here should be taken seriously since it is only the living that gravitates towards the future and

not vice versa. The mere fact that future generation is just an idea in the mind of the present generation shows that the notion of future people is nothing but the wishful thinking of the present generation, which can also be equated with an idea of a beautiful mountain that only exists in the mind.

We consider it important to say that human history has never been short of the idea of future generations. It is an idea which has been with humans from time immemorial. This suffices to say that the notion of future generations is not peculiar to the contemporary times. Virtually every surviving culture of the world talks about doing something for posterity. But what baffles us, in the whole scenario, is the fact that our environment is getting deteriorated and degraded day by day despite the universal-cultural belief in doing something for posterity.

It then brings to the fore the reason why we need a U-turn from the way we reason now to the way we ought to reason. In other words, it is high time we took a radical decision against an idea that does not obviously benefit our environment. After all, democracy, which has been arguably adjudged as the best form of government, “is not disposed to sacrifice citizens or a whole generation for some distant future goal” (Thompson, 2010: 17). This point is further buttressed by Dennis F. Thompson (pps. 17-18) when he explains that “it is a virtue of democracy that it pays attention to the actual citizens and seeks to hold actual rulers accountable for actions they take on behalf of citizens”. As we want to argue, the success of democracy today is largely dependent on its principle of “presentism” (Ibid. 18).

Given the above, we want to say, without fear of contradiction, that the proponents of future generations' argument do not have what it takes to secure and protect our environment for us. If truly they do, our environment would not have witnessed this kind of monumental abuses by humans of all ages. The clarion call now is for all and sundry to acknowledge the fact that we cannot continue with activities and belief-systems that make us vulnerable and susceptible to environmental degradation. We must realize now that we, the people of the present generation, deserve to live in a healthy environment if we were to fully actualize our potentialities.

Whatever sacrifice we can make, to get for ourselves a healthy environment, cannot be too much. This is because the past is gone, the future is unknown, the only thing that is incontrovertible, constant and real, is the present. Consequently, the quest for environmental sustainability must not be propelled, either implicitly or explicitly, to benefit anyone other than the ever-flowing present generation of all lives; otherwise such a move will become a charade and complete fiasco. As we have insinuated, the present is a continuum. Whoever comes into existence must come to join the present, and not the past or the future. It is with this in mind we conclude that the quest for environmental sustainability would be more plausible and less controversial if it were centred around the lives of the present generation of all organisms.

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