

# An Ethical Consideration of the Concept of Sustainability in ESD:

## The Arguments of Derek Parfit and Hitoshi Nagai

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The study critically examines the concept of sustainability by focusing on the arguments of Derek Parfit and Hitoshi Nagai. The concept of sustainability is based on that of intergenerational ethics, which asserts the rights of future generations. Parfit's thought experiment "Depletion" shows that we cannot make assumptions about the characteristics of future generations in order to guarantee their rights because of the Non-Identity Problem. Nagai suggests that our ethics are derived from inverted moral and ethical values, and that intergenerational ethics underpinning the concept of Education for Sustainable Development is rooted in the present generational ethics as our inverted values.

Keywords : Derek Parfit, future generations, Hitoshi Nagai, nonidentity problem, sustainability

### 1. Introduction

This study aims to critically examine the concept of sustainability, one of the key concepts in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), focusing on the arguments of British ethicist Derek Parfit and Japanese philosopher Hitoshi Nagai.

The basis of the concept of the sustainable construction of ESD is laid out in the Declaration of Thessaloniki, which states that the concept of sustainability includes "not only environment but also poverty, population, health, food security, democracy, human rights and peace," and ends by stating that "in the final analysis, [this is] a moral and ethical imperative."

The Declaration explains the broad nature of the concept of sustainability, including its moral and ethical dimensions. However, it raises the question, what does "moral and ethical imperative" mean? One of the answers to this question might be intergenerational ethics.<sup>1)</sup> This is because the

concept logically entails solicitude for the quality of the lives of future generations. It seems obvious that it is morally and ethically good to leave sound environments and natural resources for future generations to receive and enjoy. Our present deeds may contribute to increasing the quality of life of the next generation. The *World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* states that the preservation of the Earth's resources is "our moral obligation" in order to guarantee "inter-generational equity." As Shigetaka Imai (2008, p.124) points out, citing the *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development Japan Report*, intergenerational ethics that "do not put the burden on the next generation" is one of the fundamental concepts of sustainability.

However, if we accept that a moral and ethical imperative involves intergenerational ethics, there still remains an unanswered question: what does it mean to make assumptions regarding the

characteristics of future generations? If future generations will not be the same as the present generations, how can we make assumptions about future generations' rights? Although a number of educational and ethical studies have discussed intergenerational ethics, no scholars apart from Derek Parfit have answered this question. Such studies make assumptions about future generations and claim that present generations have a responsibility to guarantee their rights (Glover, 1984; Jonas, 1979; Kato, 1991, 2005; Kira, 2019; Sakai, 2013, 2014).

Therefore, this study refers to Parfit's argument to show what it actually means to make assumptions about the characteristics of future generations when we discuss their rights. Nagai's argument then indicates how we should think of future generations.

## 2. Parfit's Challenge: The Non-Identity Problem

### 2.1. Depletion or Conservation

Parfit's thought experiment "Depletion" must first be explained:

*Depletion.* As a community, we must choose whether to deplete or conserve certain kinds of resources. If we choose Depletion, the quality of life over the next two centuries would be slightly higher than it would have been if we had chosen Conservation. But it would later, for many centuries, be much lower than it would have been if we had chosen Conservation. This would be because, at the start of this period, people would have to find alternatives for the resources that we had depleted... (Parfit, 1984, p. 362)

It is not necessary to discuss the differences between Great Depletion and Lesser Depletion because they are not relevant to the aims of this study (see Figure 1). The point here is that if we choose Depletion, future generations will have a much lower quality of life than if Conservation is chosen. Thus, in order to guarantee the rights of future generations, it is fair to say that conservation is a morally and ethically better choice than Depletion because it is sure to improve the quality of life of future generations.

However, Parfit questions how we value the

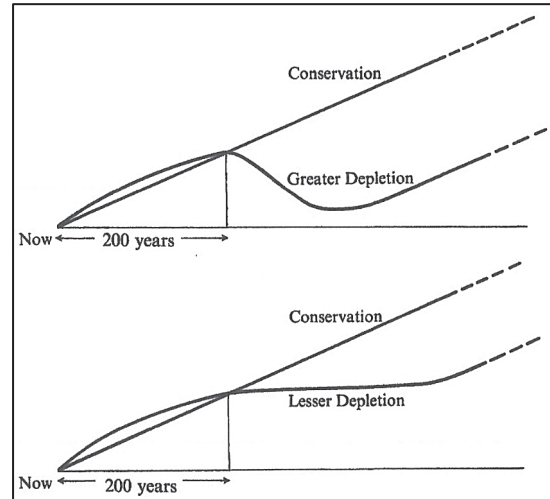


Fig.1: Depletion (Parfit, 1984, p.361-2)

quality of life of future generations after the choice is made between Depletion and Conservation because people in an After-Depletion-World and those in an After-Conservation-World will not be identical. Choosing the route of Depletion could cause the over-exploitation of the Earth's resources, the destruction of the natural environment, and the increase of harmful nuclear waste. Moreover, it could also affect the population of future generations and their personalities; in other words, it could change their physical and mental characteristics. The personalities of future generations who live in the After-Depletion-World and in After-Conservation-World would be purely and totally different from those of current generations. If we consider the After-Depletion generation, we would choose Conservation to avoid decreasing their quality of life and to guarantee their rights, but we could not reach out to help them. Those we tried to reach out to would not exist, as there would only be those in an After-Conservation-World because we would have chosen the route of Conservation.

Contrary to our common sense, we can never empathize with the generations of both worlds at the same time, and furthermore, we can never tell which choice could make people's lives better. Another of Parfit's anecdotes may help illustrate this point in a more concrete manner. Some years ago, a British politician welcomed the fact that there had been fewer teenage pregnancies in recent years. In response, a middle-aged man wrote an angry letter to *The Times*. He had been born when

his mother was fourteen. He admitted that because his mother was so young, his early years had been difficult, but his life was now well worth living (Parfit, 1984, p.364). Here, Parfit raises the question, “[w]as the politician suggesting that it would have been better if [the man] had never been born?” Parfit’s answer is no. The story explains the point of the thought experiment “Depletion” : people will be able to live happy lives no matter which world we choose because, in believing that life itself is worth living, they live in each world separately and cannot weigh the differences between these two worlds. Whether we choose a world of Depletion or Conservation, future generations’ lives may be paradoxically happy. Parfit calls this the “*Non-Identity Problem*” (Parfit, 1984, p.359)

Parfit’s “Depletion” sheds light on the argument for the rights of future generations. Intergenerational ethics claims that present generations have the duty to ensure that the rights of future generations are upheld. According to *Our Common Future*, the “Fundamental Human Right” is to “an environment adequate for [individuals’] health and well being.” As Takayuki Kira explains, “future generations have the right to enjoy [a] sound environment, meanwhile the present generations have the duty to keep and provide it” (Kira, 2019, p.140). The underlining of this responsibility involves a moral and ethical presupposition that future generations should not suffer from a poor environment.

As Parfit states, however, if we choose to engage in Conservation to guarantee future generations’ rights, the people in an After-Conservation-World will not be identical to those in an After-Depletion-World. Thus, arguments based on future generations’ rights seem to be unjustifiable.

## 2.2. Two Objections to Parfit’s Conclusion

Although Parfit’s argument is valid, it does not meet our expectations that we should be able to imagine future generations and, in fact, choose to help them. Parfit himself tried to find *Theory X* to solve the nonidentity problem because he was not convinced by this conclusion. However, in his *Reasons and Persons*, he was not able to find *Theory X* after all; this remains a challenge that we must face.

In the following sections, I show the difficulty of

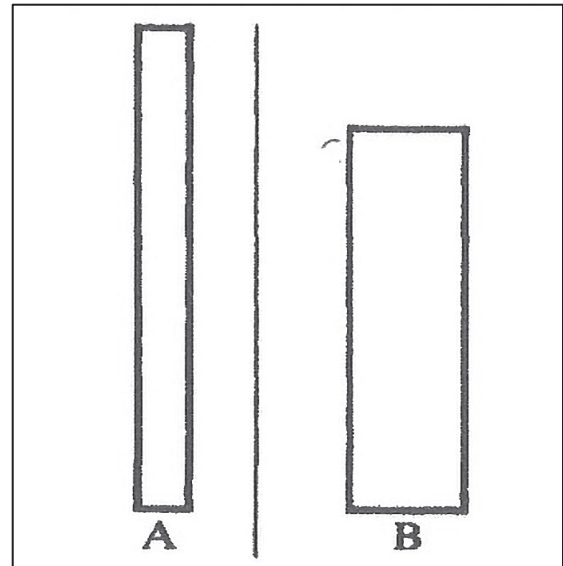


Fig. 2: Two Blocks (Parfit, 1984, p.385)

addressing this problem and finding *Theory X*.

### (1) The “Grasping it Loosely Argument”

One of the appropriate arguments that can be used to solve the aforementioned problem is to grasp the identity of future generations loosely. This argument asserts that Parfit’s criterion for a person’s identity is too strict. We normally do not categorize future generations into “worlds” by means of their personal identities when considering their rights and making attempts to guarantee them. Assuming that Parfit’s argument is correct, we can make assumptions about future generations without any difficulties. In this study, I call this argument Grasping it Loosely Argument (GLA). It seems to be successful and persuasive because it appeals to our expectations (Kira, 2019, p.140).<sup>2)</sup>

However, the GLA, which Parfit calls the “No-Difference View,” gives rise to another problem (ibid., 1984, p.369). Parfit explains this as follows:

If in either of two possible outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it will be worse if those who live are worse off, or have a lower quality of life, than those who would have lived. (p.369)

Thus, regardless of personal differences in the two possible worlds, it is worse if people have a lower quality of life, and vice versa.

Parfit considers whether this is valid through a thought experiment (see Figure 2). The width of

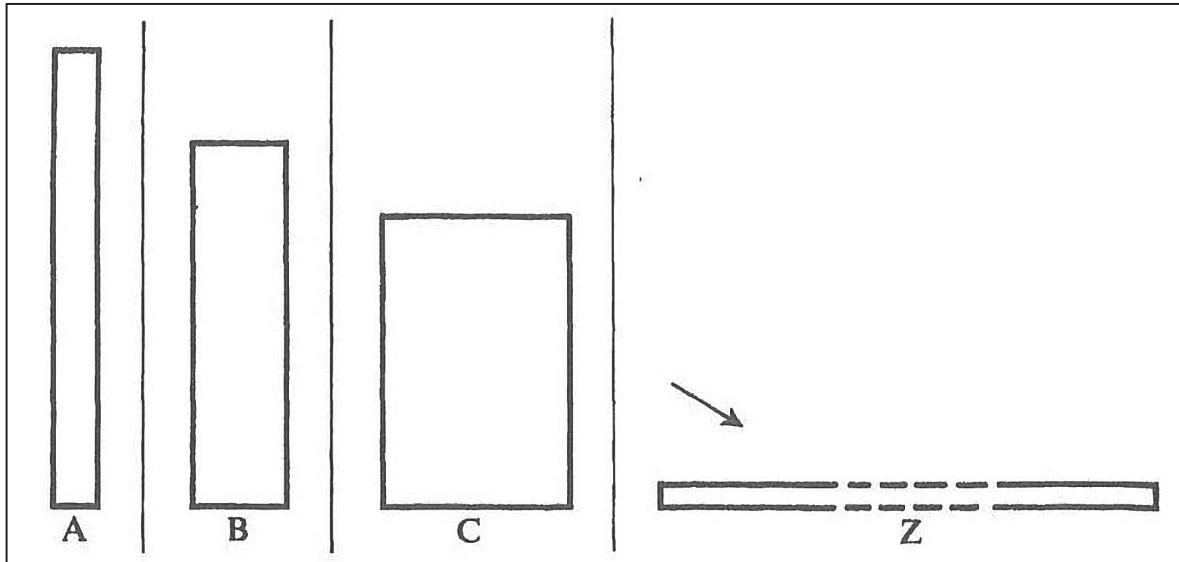


Fig. 3: The Repugnant Conclusion (Parfit, 1984, p.388)

each block shows the number of people living and the height shows their quality of life. A refers to present generations and B refers to future generations. In B, there are twice as many people living as in A, and these people are all worse off than those in A. However, the lives of those in B, compared with those in A, are more than half as much worth living. As Figure 2 indicates, the space of B is larger than that of A. Comparing the quality of life in A and B, people in B have lives that are more worth living than those of people in A.

If we admit that Parfit's argument is persuasive, we cannot avoid a slippery slope argument (see Figure 3). B would be better than A, and according to the same reasoning, C would be better than B, and finally, Z would be the best. Z is an enormous population whose members have lives that are not very high above the level at which life ceases to be worth living. Even if Z could almost only have hard lives, it could be the outcome with the greatest total sum of happiness. Parfit calls this "*the Repugnant conclusion*" and describes it as follows.

*The Repugnant conclusion:* For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living. (Parfit, 1984, p.388)

Here, it becomes clear that in his search for

Theory X, Parfit cannot avoid a dilemma. On the one hand, if we accept the nonidentity problem, we cannot assess the differences in the quality of life of future generations in each world because they are non-identical people. On the other hand, if we assume the no-difference view in order to avoid the nonidentity problem, we must agree that ten billion people will have lives that are barely worth living. Therefore, the GLA is insufficient as a counter argument to the nonidentity problem because it cannot avoid the repugnant conclusion.<sup>3)</sup>

## (2) Humanity Should Be Argument

The other counter argument to the problem is the "Humanity Should Be Argument" (HSBA) proposed by Hans Jonas (1984) that made great contributions to intergenerational ethics. Jonas criticizes traditional Western ethics because it presupposes the reciprocity of the present generations and does not take future generations into account. His aim in *The Imperative of Responsibility* is to prove our responsibility for future people.

According to Jonas, metabolism (Stoffwechsel) is one of the ontological features of humanity. Human beings are constantly constructing components of their bodies through ingestion and digestion. The fact that human beings always live at the risk of losing their own lives represents the first imperative, that "there should be humanity in the future," and then shows life is "good in itself (Gut-an-sich)." Jonas shows uses a suckling baby as an example of the imperative. The baby's mother, not without resistance but inevitably, responds to the

baby's voice and then takes care of it when hearing it. Jonas concludes that the present generations should be responsible for future generations' lives.

However, Jonas's first imperative still has a serious problem in terms of Parfit's argument. It cannot avoid a repugnant conclusion. If humanity is good in itself, as mentioned above in Figure 3, A is better than B, and Z is the best world because the more people there are, the better.

Even though I have briefly treated only two counter arguments to the nonidentity problem, it seems to me that there are no sufficient objections to it. However, like Parfit, I feel I can hardly accept it. Are there no foundations for intergenerational ethics if Parfit's argument is reasonable? I believe the answer is no. Parfit's argument does not indicate the limitations of intergenerational ethics but its characteristics.

In the following section, I will attempt to illustrate these characteristics by referring to the work of Japanese philosopher Hitoshi Nagai. Nagai persuasively explains why we should be moral from an egoistic perspective, and contributes to resolving our problem of intergenerational ethics.

### 3. Nagai's Critics of Ethics

At the outset, Nagai (2011) explains prototypical moral problems with an argument that criticizes ethics itself as a whole. The meaning of morally good and bad originates from each person's sense of good and bad. Something worth enjoying for someone is good, while something that interferes with or impairs it is bad. When something is good for a person, as well as for others, and vice versa, moral problems never arise.

However, when something good for someone turns out to be bad for another person, moral problems occur. To put this concretely, it is good for someone to destroy the natural environment, exhaust resources, and so on if they are able to enjoy their life by doing so. In contrast, it is bad for another to do so if they suffer from it. Regarding moral or ethical issues, we must not forget to consider the positionalities of persons; namely, when explaining that something is good or bad, we must make explicit who enjoys it and who suffers from it (Nagai, 2011, p.17). When someone's pursuit of happiness results in a number of unhappy lives, it

is necessary to prohibit it. Furthermore, this must be done in a manner that decreases the person's dissatisfaction and increases their satisfaction with the prohibitions. Here, there is a need for a way to constrain and satisfy people at the same time.

According to Nagai, the discourse of ethics in the long history of humanity has reversed actual bad into moral or ethical good. A thought experiment of the Gyges' ring in Plato's *Republic* might help us. The ring has magic power that makes you transparent whenever you want be with no risks. In other words, the ring-wearer can engage in any kind of wrongdoing at any time and never be discovered. Plato, through Socrates, insists that one can never be happy by doing wrong, and that what makes one happy is doing good, arguing against the idea that humanity would love to do wrong if they had the ring. Following Nagai's explanation, one of the roles of ethics is to turn bad into good by convincing people that something that is bad for them, but good for others, is, in fact, good for them, too.

Nagai claims that ethicists have tried to convince us to accept this inversion of values: good is bad, and bad is good. In this sense, one refrains from doing something good for oneself and bad for others and wishes to do something good for others and bad for oneself because one is convinced that doing something bad for others must be, in any case, bad for oneself, too. It becomes bad to destroy the natural environment, exhaust resources, and so on, when the values are reversed, even if you can enjoy a happier life by doing so.

In comparing the deontology of Kant and utilitarianism, Nagai reveals that they have constructed a cooperative relationship with each other. Generally speaking, deontology and utilitarianism are mutually exclusive. According to the Kantian view, being moral or ethical depends on fulfilling imperative duties. For example, the duty not to "make a promise with the intention not to keep it" must be followed anytime, anywhere, or in any case because it is one of the duties we must follow regardless of its benefits. However, for a utilitarian, it is not important whether promises should be kept or not, but whether they can produce "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" because being moral or ethical means bringing as many benefits as possible. If telling a lie can

produce benefits, it is regarded as a moral or ethical deed. The gap between Kant and utilitarianism lies in the criterion for judging morality. Kant's deontology emphasizes fulfilling duties, while utilitarianism values gaining benefits.

However, Nagai points out that these perspectives sometimes enter into a partnership. It is good to fulfill Kant's imperative duties, regardless of whether it serves some benefits. Many people feel good when they do not "make a promise with the intention not to keep it," even if that entails many disadvantages, because they are already convinced of the inverted values (Nagai, 2011, pp.225-227).

Nagai's argument makes a great contribution to intergenerational ethics. As Parfit has explained, when assuming future generations' quality of life, we have to face the dilemma that if we undertake the nonidentity problem or the repugnant conclusion in spite of the GLA and HSBA, there still remains the troubling question of how we can assume future generations and consider intergenerational ethics.

Nagai's suggestion gives a new angle to this dilemma. Following his explanation, the essence of ethics lies in inverted values, where something actually good (bad) is turned into something morally and ethically bad (good). Moral and ethical values always cover actual values. As Nagai uncovered above, when considering moral values, we must think of positionalities, that is, who enjoys or suffers. However, in the context of arguments for intergenerational ethics, describing them strictly is almost impossible because a person from a future generation has not yet come into the world. Parfit's nonidentity problem is caused by that reason. In contrast, Parfit inevitably encountered the repugnant conclusion by trying to respond to this issue. This dilemma indicates that our ethics of inverted values are originally rooted in personal values, which arises if we try to underpin intergenerational ethics apart from personal positions.

So what we should do here, in the light of the arguments of Parfit and Nagai, is to consider future generations based on our generation's inverted values, rather than to make assumptions about them directly. Personal values are always the drivers of intergenerational ethics. In this sense,

intergenerational ethics is not directly related to future generations, but our present generation. It is suggestive that Jonas uses the example of a suckling baby to suggest the imperative of humanity. This is because the picture of future generations assumed by Jonas is, different from Parfit's thought experiment, exactly the future generations within the reach of the present generations, that is, those that are in touch with our values.

Parfit's argument paradoxically shows that intergenerational ethics is not a challenging responsibility for future generations, but is based on the inverted values of our present generations.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study critically examined the concept of sustainability by focusing on the arguments of Parfit and Nagai and found that the concept of intergenerational ethics underpinning the concept of ESD is rooted in the inverted values of the present generation.

It might be obvious and unsurprising to see the Kyoto Protocol as a "failure"; however, it could provide a suggestion for education for sustainability. It would answer questions such as why we should be responsible for future generations, and should we first devote ourselves to our own issues because they are never in touch with us? One of the answers to these questions could be that responsibilities for future generations are those for the present generation. We think of future generations because it brings us an inverted good. Ignoring the future involves ignoring those living in the present. Besides, some members of future generations are strongly connected to the present; like Jonas's suckling baby, they are already within us.

Although this study did not discuss how to convince people of inverted values, it should first be clarified that sustainability for future generations reflects our generations' positionalities.

#### Notes

- 1) The term "intergenerational justice" or "intergenerational equity" is commonly used in the context of ethics. "Intergenerational ethics" is generally used in Japan because Hisatake Kato, one of the most important Japanese ethicists, used it in his pioneering study *Encouragement of*

*Environmental Ethics*. Thus, this study uses the term “intergenerational ethics” owing to Kato’s study (Yoshinaga, 2012, p.180).

- 2) Kira (2019, p.140) presents another argument to grasp the causal pathway loosely by proposing that personal identities do not depend only on genetic identities. In this study, I do not treat the genetic view because the difference between the two arguments does not cause any serious problems.
- 3) As his use of the word “repugnant” suggests, Parfit finds this conclusion hard to accept (p.388).

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## Appendix

This study is based on a draft for an oral

presentation titled, “An Ethical Consideration on the Concept of Sustainability: Derek Parfit and Hitoshi Nagai’s Challenges” presented at the Global

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