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On Harming Others: A Response to Partridge

ALAN CARTER

*Department of Philosophy
University of Colorado at Boulder
CO 80309-0232, USA
URL: <http://spot.colorado.edu/~cartera/>*

I.

In the preceding article,¹ Ernest Partridge both criticises my earlier response² to Thomas Schwartz's extremely worrying argument that we cannot harm distant future persons and develops one section of that response. Partridge concludes that the person affecting principle, upon which Schwartz's argument is premised, 'is *incomplete* as a moral principle' (p. 83). And in so doing he claims to dissent from both Schwartz and myself.

I do find this rather odd. For at no point do I even suggest, never mind state, that my view is that the person affecting principle is *complete* as a moral principle (whatever that means). Indeed, at the very end of my response to Schwartz I direct the reader to my earlier defence of value pluralism.³ And it should be evident from that discussion that my actual view is that the moral problem of which policies to choose with regard to future persons can be solved without making any use at all of the person affecting principle. My sole aim in my critique of Schwartz was to show how his argument fails even granting that principle, and by doing so without having to rely on contrary (and therefore contestable) intuitions, as Partridge does in the article above.

But this is a relatively minor quibble, for Partridge and I are in complete agreement that there is more to morality than a singular reliance on the person affecting principle, notwithstanding his presumption to the contrary. So allow me to take a little more time in replying to his specific criticisms of my response to Schwartz; for here we most certainly are in disagreement.⁴ Partridge writes:

Assume the premises – 'disappearing beneficiaries' and 'the person affecting principle' – and Schwartz's conclusion follows: 'we have no obligation to any of our distant descendants to adopt *P*' (i.e., a policy to restrict population, conserve natural resources, preserve the environment, etc.). (p. 82)

And he adds:

Alan Carter chooses to accept both premises and yet rejects Schwartz's conclusion, which must mean that he finds the logical inference to that conclusion to be

invalid. Unfortunately, we have found no convincing demonstration of this invalidity and so must conclude that his refutation of Schwartz and the Future Persons Paradox has failed. (p. 83)

Partridge also claims in the abstract to his article that ‘Carter’s attempt to refute Schwartz’s argument by focusing on the individuality of moral action fails, since it evades the essential point of Schwartz’s argument’ (p. 75). Yet it seems to me it is rather that Partridge ‘evades the essential point’ of my argument.

However, this may well be due to my argument having been presented too succinctly. So allow me to expand on it slightly in an attempt to make it clearer, and thereby, hopefully, limit future misunderstandings.

Consider the use of ‘we’ in the following controversial claim by an imaginary Manchester United striker:

(1) We are the greatest soccer team in the world.

Now consider the use of ‘we’ in the following claim by a Vietnam War veteran:

(2) We had lived long enough to die in war, but not long enough to vote.

(1) cannot plausibly be intended to mean

(3) Each of us is the greatest soccer team in the world.

(3) is incoherent, for no individual person constitutes a soccer *team*. Instead, (1) must mean something like

(4) Combined together, we form the greatest soccer team on Earth.

But the second phrase in (2) cannot plausibly mean

(5) Combined together, the years we had lived when drafted added to less than 21.

(5) is clearly false, for many of those drafted were between the ages of 18 and 21; and only two such persons would, combined together, have lived for more than 21 years. So, instead, (2) must be intended to mean something like

(6) Each of us was old enough to be sacrificed by and for the state, yet too young to be permitted to vote against an unjust war!

Hence, there are at least two quite distinct senses of ‘we’. Let us refer to the use of ‘we’ in (1) and (4) as ‘the collective sense of “we”’, and let us refer to the use of ‘we’ in (2) and (6) as ‘the individual sense of “we”’. Further, in order to avoid any possible equivocations between these two senses, let us rewrite (1) as

(7) We, collectively, are the greatest soccer team in the world.

And let us rewrite (2) as

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(8) We, individually, had lived long enough to die in war, but, individually, not long enough to vote.

Armed with this distinction between these two senses of ‘we’, my argument against Schwartz revolves around the contention that, while it may be true that we, collectively, cannot harm any distant future persons by failing to adopt some long-range welfare policy, it is far from certain that we, individually, are incapable of doing so. And the reason for this is that, while it is certain that we, collectively, will determine the identity of every distant future person, it is far from certain that every one of our individual actions will do so. Yet actions that do not determine an individual’s identity are potentially capable of benefiting or harming that person.

Given that this is the core of my argument against Schwartz, it is difficult to know what to make of Partridge’s insistence (noted earlier) that ‘Carter chooses to accept both premises [“disappearing beneficiaries” and “the person affecting principle”] and yet rejects Schwartz’s conclusion, which must mean that he finds the logical inference to that conclusion to be invalid’. My position is, rather, that there is a sense in which Schwartz’s argument appears to work and a sense in which it clearly fails. It fails when we employ the individual sense of ‘we’. And what I add of import is that we, individually, are morally praiseworthy or blameworthy.

Partridge responds by claiming that ‘it is obviously true’ that our individual acts can affect future persons, but only ‘for the near future and for insignificant personal acts’ (p. 78). ‘However’, Partridge continues,

if the ‘personal act’ in question is the deciding vote by my Senator in favour of the Kyoto treaty, then the full force of Schwartz’s argument obtains, as that ‘individual act’ results, within Schwartz’s hypothetical six generations, in an entirely different population coming into existence. (p. 78)

But this strikes me as patently false. The Senator has no such power on her own. This seems to me to be a clear case of ‘being mesmerised by collectivities’⁵ – in this case by the political community appearing as an entity in itself (moreover, appearing as an entity whose decisions are determined by a vote). Agreed, there may well be an entirely different population within six generations – but only because of the actions of millions of people who choose to act in conformity with the prevailing political system. If none of them continues to act so, then the Senator’s vote would be an ‘insignificant personal act’. The moral injunction in my response to Schwartz comprised an appeal for each of us to think about our individual actions – to individuate them – and to accept moral responsibility for them. I fear that this has fallen on deaf ears in Partridge’s case, for none of the individual actions that would need to go into making the Senator’s vote a significant act seem to have registered with Partridge as actions at all.

The same applies to Partridge's second objection to my argument. He writes:

Furthermore, the very point of...my letter to my Senator is to provoke that very 'collective' action which, Carter concedes, has the result that Schwartz postulates.... I would not send...that letter unless I believed that [it] might, in some small way, bring about a policy that would 'benefit' future generations. Yet Schwartz asserts, and Carter concurs, that such a policy (*ergo* a 'collective action'), if enacted, would produce a population of individuals, a few generations hence, that would not have existed had that 'collective action' not taken place – individuals who therefore cannot be affected and thus not be harmed by our failure to adopt the policy, or benefited by our adoption thereof. (p. 78)

But this, again, constitutes a failure to individuate actions. What Partridge insists on seeing only as a 'collective action' comprises an untold number of individual actions, any of which might be beneficial or harmful to distant future persons. That Partridge chooses to write a letter to his senator in order that we, collectively, will do something is besides the point, given my particular response to Schwartz. For when we, individually, proceed to act in conformity with the policy previously supported by the letter writing campaign, we, individually, may well harm or benefit even the most distant of future persons. (For as I argued in my response to Schwartz: 'even if I *were* able to affect the identity of every person in the distant future, it would not follow that I could not harm any of them. I could still harm a future person whose identity I determined as long as one of my actions made him or her worse off than he or she would otherwise have been – in other words, as long as that action was not the one which determined his or her identity.')

Furthermore, the individual action of writing a letter with the aim of bringing about a state of affairs in which some present individual will benefit some distant future person merits praise, just as the individual action of writing a letter with the aim of bringing about a state of affairs in which some present individual will harm some distant future person merits condemnation. Talk of writing letters in order to bring about collective actions is, in this context, quite simply a refusal to individuate all of the various actions that would be involved – a form of collective irresponsibility, as it were.

Partridge's third, and final, objection to my response to Schwartz again misses the point by failing to see how what might be thought of as 'collective actions' can be individuated, and it does so while simultaneously misrepresenting Schwartz's argument. Partridge writes:

Most significantly, Carter's hypothetical 'non-contingent' individuals in the present or near future, who are benefited by my individual acts (i.e., who would exist whether or not I so acted), are simply outside the scope of Schwartz's theory

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and thus in no way refute it. About such non-contingent individuals, Schwartz might say to me, with full justification, ‘well good for you – you have behaved commendably, and it is a fine thing that you have *favourably affected* other lives. *But that is simply not the topic of my argument!*’ Then he might continue, ‘my thesis is that acts and policies (either by individuals or collectives) which successfully intend to alter the future will, in approximately six generations, result in different (i.e. “contingent”) individuals living in that future – individuals, *qua* different, whose lives can not be affected by what we intend and implement in the present generation. I will freely concede that there might be “non-contingent” individuals in the near future who come about despite insignificant acts by individuals, but these individuals are explicitly outside the scope of my (Schwartzian) argument.’ (p. 78)

As I argued in my response to Schwartz, it is highly implausible that every one of an individual’s environmentally damaging actions that will result in, or contribute towards, future suffering will determine the existence of every future person ever affected by it, no matter how distant in the future.⁷ For Partridge simply to assert that we vote for policies that will affect the future and to claim that this ‘evades’ my argument is in effect to confine the use of ‘we’ to only one of the two senses I earlier distinguished. It is to fail to see that when we, collectively, choose a policy, it will only affect the future when we, individually, engage in a host of actions in conformity with that policy. But those individual actions are precisely the ones that can affect through harming or benefiting (even very distant) future persons, and hence can be morally criticised or praised (assuming, for the sake of argument, the person affecting principle). In a word, those who are ‘contingent’ from the standpoint of the ‘collective’ policy – those that result from what we, collectively, ‘will’, as it were – are ‘non-contingent’ from the standpoint of what we, individually, may *do* in conformity with the supposed collective will (namely, the policy in question).

Moreover, Partridge’s reply misrepresents Schwartz in wholly ignoring his explicit claim that ‘*P* [any long-range welfare policy] cannot be justified by appeal to the welfare of our distant descendants, because the failure to adopt *P* would hurt *not a single one of them*’⁸ (even though I twice quoted this key remark in my response to Schwartz). In a nutshell, there will be ‘non-contingent’ individuals whom *each of us can hurt by acting in conformity with any long-range welfare policy*. The adoption of *P* is not simply reducible to some collective act. Of course, it might be thought by many that in adopting *P* we, collectively, do one single thing. But that is to be ‘mesmerised by collectivities’; for we, individually, do many, many things in adopting a policy. And in appearing to miss this central point, Partridge seems to have missed the whole point of my argument against Schwartz.

II.

As we noted at the beginning, Partridge responds to Schwartz by arguing that the person affecting principle 'is *incomplete* as a moral principle' (p. 83). Unfortunately, Partridge takes the person affecting principle to hold that 'harming [or benefiting] a person is to make that person worse [or better] off than he or she otherwise would have been'.⁹ In fact, the 'person-affecting principle' holds, rather, that 'the only morally significant actions are those which affect persons who actually exist or who will, in fact, exist'.¹⁰ One way in which one might respond to Schwartz is, instead of rejecting the person affecting principle, by challenging this particular notion of 'harm'. And if it is deemed adequate to reject Schwartz's argument merely on the basis of contrary intuitions, as Partridge does in the article above, concerning the implications of Schwartz's argument, then let me, in the space that remains, offer just such an argument.

Now, it is indeed widely assumed that harming or hurting a person involves making him or her worse off than he or she would otherwise have been. Therefore, 'a, by performing act ϕ , has made *b* worse off than *b* would have been had *a* not performed ϕ ' might be thought to be an adequate analysis of 'by performing act ϕ , *a* has harmed *b*'. But if this were indeed an *adequate* analysis, it would seem to be the case that if *a*, by performing ϕ , has not made *b* worse off than *b* would have been had *a* not performed ϕ , then by performing ϕ , *a* has not harmed *b*.

It is precisely this apparent implication of the widely-held assumption about what harming someone consists in that Schwartz employs in order to reach his particularly odious conclusion: namely, that whenever we are morally appraising our actions and deciding what we ought to do, we need not take into account the well-being of distant future people, for we cannot possibly harm (or benefit) them. Because the identity of distant future persons is, it would seem, dependent upon our actions, were we to perform different actions to those which we presently fear might be harmful to them, the particular future persons whom we would hope thereby to benefit would not be better off, for they would not exist in order to be better off.

Put another way, it appears that no matter what we might contemplate doing, we cannot possibly make distant future people worse off than they would otherwise be, because *they* would not otherwise be. We cannot possibly harm them because there is simply not the *relatum* which the concept 'harm' is widely presumed to require. Thus, on the widely-held view of what harming another consists in, those actions which we might feel we ought to avoid on the grounds that they might prove harmful to distant future people could not, in fact, be harmful to them at all.

Hence, so long as we are lacking any other significant considerations (such as what might instead be required of us were nature to possess intrinsic value,

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say), it seems that we may as well continue with our present environmentally destructive activities¹¹ and pay distant future persons no heed whatsoever.

This does seem to be a somewhat counter-intuitive implication of the widely-held manner of conceptualising 'harm'. However, while it may seem counter-intuitive, that might not, on its own, motivate a rejection of this particular conception of 'harm', for the implication that we need pay the well-being of distant future persons no heed would, no doubt, be a very comfortable conclusion for many to draw, even if it might seem to others to provide adequate reason to enquire into whether or not making a person worse off than he or she would otherwise have been is both necessary and sufficient for harming them.

Fortunately for the well-being of distant future persons, there is reason to doubt that 'harm' consists solely in making someone worse off than he or she would otherwise have been. For consider the following example.

Imagine that not one but two snipers have been hired in order to ensure the President's assassination. However, because of the exceptional protection provided by the state's security services, only one brief opportunity to shoot the nation's leader presents itself. Consequently, both gunmen fire simultaneously.

Now, if the first assassin had failed to shoot, the President would still have been killed instantaneously by the shot fired from the second assassin's gun. Hence, on the widely-held analysis of 'harm', the first assassin, in shooting the President, fails to harm her, for he fails to make her worse off than she would otherwise have been. Equally, if the second gunman had missed his only opportunity to shoot the President, she would still have been killed instantaneously by the first assassin's bullet. Hence, the second assassin, too, fails to harm the President by shooting her, for his shooting her does not make her any worse off than she would have been otherwise.

Agreed, both assassins jointly make the President worse off than she would otherwise have been. But surely we do not want to say that neither assassin, individually, harms the President. For consider the dilemma faced by the judge and jury trying the assassins in a (no doubt, barbaric) land that has retained capital punishment. On the widely-held analysis of 'harm', neither assassin would seem to have harmed the President. But they have jointly (collectively) harmed her. Hence, the judge and jury might prematurely conclude that, while it would be impermissible to hang the assassins individually, they may be jointly hanged, simultaneously, by the same noose (as Ulysses is reported to have hanged his slave-girls upon returning home)! But sadly for the state, that would still involve each assassin suffering individual harm, for their joint execution would leave each assassin worse off than he would otherwise have been. And while it is true that they have jointly harmed the President, and while it appears that it is, therefore, legitimate for them to be jointly harmed, the assassins have not individually harmed her. So, what would justify their being harmed individually? In a word, how can it be justifiable to harm either assassin when neither, individually, has harmed the President?

But quite irrespective of the morality of capital punishment, this is obviously absurd. There is little, if any, doubt in our minds that each assassin has harmed the President, even though neither assassin has made her worse off than she would otherwise have been. Thus, '*a*, by performing act ϕ , has made *b* worse off than *b* would have been had *a* not performed ϕ ' does not appear to be an adequate analysis of 'by performing act ϕ , *a* has harmed *b*'.

However, while the case of the two assassins makes it difficult to retain our confidence in the claim that we only harm a person when we make him or her worse off than he or she would otherwise have been,¹² it does seem to be the case that when we do make a person worse off overall than he or she would otherwise have been, we succeed in harming that person. This suggests that making a person worse off overall than he or she would have been otherwise, while not a necessary condition for inflicting harm, is certainly a *sufficient* condition.

But if *a*, by performing act ϕ , has made *b* worse off than *b* would have been had *a* not performed ϕ is only one of several sufficient conditions for establishing that *a* has harmed *b*, and the case of the two assassins strongly suggests that there is at least one further sufficient condition, then a remaining task, clearly, is to identify other conditions for inflicting harm. And this task is far from insignificant. For the example of the two assassins is not a single, peculiar anomaly. The problem it exposes arises whenever an effect is overdetermined. And there would seem to be very many instances of serious harm which fall under that description.

By way of conclusion, the example of the two assassins appears to indicate that one can harm a person even when one fails to make him or her worse off than he or she would otherwise be. Therefore, '*a*, by performing act ϕ , has made *b* worse off than *b* would have been had *a* not performed ϕ ' would not, in fact, and contrary to widely-held assumptions, seem to be an adequate analysis of 'by performing act ϕ , *a* has harmed *b*'. Nevertheless, making a person worse off than he or she would have been otherwise does appear to be a sufficient condition for inflicting harm on him or her. Of course, merely saying this leaves a lot of work to be done in providing an effective analysis of 'harm'. But even pending that further work, if the assassins can, individually, harm the President even when neither makes her worse off than she would otherwise have been, as we seem inclined to insist, then we cannot be certain that we fail to harm distant future persons by polluting the planet and wasting the resources they will need, even if none of the future persons affected is thereby made worse off than he or she would have been otherwise.

Therefore, the risk of harm to future generations that certain of our actions poses, even if no particular future person would be better off were we (individually or collectively) not to perform the action in question, continues to provide a powerful moral reason for conservationist strategies.

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NOTES

Alan Carter is Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

¹ Partridge 2002. All page number in parentheses are to this article.

² Carter 2001.

³ See Carter 1999a.

⁴ We are also in significant disagreement regarding this astonishing claim: ‘Both Carter and Rawls fail to appreciate the full implications of Rawls’s description of the “persons in the original position”. Due to the veil of ignorance, these “persons” are neither persons nor a plurality. Absent any distinguishing personal qualities of the “parties”, the original position collapses to a more familiar concept of “the moral point of view”, though Rawls’s book is no less magnificent for that fact’ (note 2, pp. 83–4). This seems to me at best to confuse ontological and epistemological issues. Even were it the case that those in the original position were *unaware* that they are persons (and there is no reason to think that Rawls was ever committed to any such silliness, and good reason to think that he wasn’t), they clearly *are* persons in Rawls’ 1970s view, and are the representatives of what are clearly persons in his later accounts.

⁵ Carter 2001, p. 444. For a critique of the kind of collectivist thinking that leads to such problematic assumptions, see Carter 1999b, Ch. 3.

⁶ Carter 2001, p. 443.

⁷ See *ibid.*

⁸ Schwartz 1979, p. 185 [emphasis added]. Interestingly, Partridge makes no mention of this article, which is the one to which my article specifically responds.

⁹ Here, Partridge quotes from (the wrong part) of Carter 2001, p. 446.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

¹¹ On the extent of some of these activities, see Carter 1999b, Ch. 1.

¹² James Woodward (1986) also challenges the view that we can only harm a person by making him or her worse off than he or she would have been otherwise. However, it is not clear that Woodward’s key example of a black being refused an airline ticket for a flight which subsequent met disaster is not a case of a person being wronged rather than of being harmed. Alternatively, it might be argued that, in this particular case, the person discriminated against suffers a local rather than a global harm. But many local harms surely ought to be allowed, such as amputating the leg of a person trapped under a tree who would otherwise die. See, for example, Kagan 1998, pp. 66–8. It seems highly doubtful, therefore, that Woodward has managed to solve this particular problem.

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