

*This is the seventh of a series examining the moral dimensions of economic “externalities”, the spillover or incidental side effects in market activity.*

*The series is available in expanded form, with an introductory chapter and updated essays, as an e-book to facilitate reading and annotating: <https://nmichaelbrennen.com/shop/>.*

In a late 1970s paper, “The Futurity Problem,” Gregory Kavka, siding with what he considered a majority on the pessimistic side, argued that unchecked population and industrial growth would lead to serious externalities for future generations. The question he considered was whether we as present generations are morally obligated to make serious interventions into the economy to plan for future generations, at the cost of a significant decrease in material living standards and freedom to have large families. Citing a few of his open sentences seems worthwhile.

“Whether we should allow population and industry to grow essentially unchecked, as we have in the past, is the subject of an active debate within the scientific and intellectual community. Pessimists warn that this would lead—perhaps within a few generations—to extreme shortages of food, clean air, fossil fuels, and other resources needed to sustain human life and civilization. ... I shall simply *assume* that the dire warnings of the pessimists, who seem to be in the majority, are correct. ... Are we morally obligated, in order to prevent impending catastrophe for mankind, to impose strict limit limits on population growth, pollution, and resource use...?” (109, emphasis original.)

His conclusion is in the affirmative. His argument was two-fold. First, he accepted as given that relatively wealthy people are morally obligated to aid strangers, imposing even high costs on themselves and those in whom they are in special relationship. The second argument, which he developed more extensively, was that present generations are morally obligated to future generations to plan for their quality of life. He argued that three things should be done to improve the life of future generations. Beyond listing these, I will not attempt here to summarize his arguments, as I find more important certain implicit premises of his argument and the impact of implementing his conclusion. He proposed three general areas of action.

1. Impose strict controls to limit population, pollution, and resource use (111.)
2. Make very heavy investments in the “survival sciences:” agriculture, population control, energy production, war prevention, etc. (112.)
3. Develop institutions to represent future people: propose social programs, advise policy makers, pressure legislators, encourage the public to participate (112.)

My response is two-fold. I will consider first implicit premises in his argument; I will then consider the possible consequences of implementing his conclusion.

Antony Flew pointed out two implicit assumptions to John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, and these seem quite applicable to Kavka’s work as well: “that the distribution of all goods of every kind is or ought to be an activity consciously and deliberately performed by central authority; and that all such goods, whether already produced or in the future to be produced, are available for such distribution or redistribution free of all prior claims of possession or entitlement” (70.) In other words, exchange systems based on private property are subject to redefinition and preemption at any time.

I suggest that Kavka's language demonstrate exactly those same two presumptions. In the course of developing his argument, he considered a possible position, stating it in the following terms: "These two examples suggest that, under conditions of scarcity, *resource distributors* have reason to show preference for existing *resource consumers* ... over future *resource consumers*" (114, emphasis mine.) The terms "resource distributors" and "resource consumers" are significant; from his opening statement and others similar through the essay it seems implicit that he considers markets as one of the central causes of the impending catastrophe, thus central planners should be the means of distributing resources.

Another implicit premise of Kavka's argument seems to be that the transaction costs of implementing his proposal are zero, or if non-zero, that transaction costs are inconsequential with respect to the goal to be attained; though uncertain, I base this on the fact that he gave no consideration to the opportunity costs of his argument.

Considering the second half of my response, implementing his plan basically centers around reducing resource consumption by reducing the number of consumers, reducing per-consumer consumption, and increasing basic resource production. However, Kavka's three points seem somewhat inconsistent.

From the first tenet of strict controls there seems to be a strong element of government coercion. Market interventions in the form of taxes to artificially raise prices and dissuade consumption might be an implementation strategy; if however people could not be trusted to discipline themselves in the market, paying the higher prices anyway, consumption would presumably be rationed.

Though not explicitly stated, his second tenet of investment in resource production would seem to be government investment, given that a theme is that private investment and industry are part of the runaway problem. Funding heavy investment would require heavy taxation.

The third tenet of advocacy and pressure, seems to be designed to try and preserve some vestige of a liberal framework to carry out his proposal, but this seems at odds with what one might expect from the first two points. Advocacy of legislatures is inconsistent with the high State intervention required for the first two.

One cannot impose the degree of government control required to implement his plan and still expect the economy to continue to function in the manner that Kavka seems to assume throughout his post - particularly in the area of collective accomplishments, one of the grounds on which he argued to plan for future generations (117.) His plan could not be implemented without creating enormous negative spillovers in the current generation. It would require a highly complex central planning organization to plan the production and allocate the resources the planners deem necessary to both provide sufficiently for present and future generations. In such an environment, the personal incentives that drive innovation, production, and creativity would be squelched, exacerbating the productivity required to fund the heavy investments Kavka proposed. Such an approach would be highly illiberal, recalling many of Hayek's and others' arguments against totalitarianism.

Finally, I will briefly mention that it may seem that one cannot oppose Kavka's concern without

seeming to not care about future generations. That does not follow; one may agree in principle with the goal while fundamentally disagreeing about the methodology to reach it. Two brief points, among others that could be made, must suffice here. One, given the extremely rapid technological changes in our times, how might we imagine that previous generations could have effectively planned for us, given what they knew at the time? Serious epistemological questions are at stake. Two, without in the slightest advocating for squandering resources now, I suggest we can respect the capacity of future generations to be creative within the bounds of their times.

Flew, Antony. (1995.) *Thinking About Social Thinking*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Kavka, Gregory. (1978.) "The Futurity Problem." *Obligations to Future Generations*. R.I. Sikora and Brian Barry, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 186-203.

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