

As I sit to write my response to this month's materials, I think I should start by having a look at a picture of my mother. My mother and I were estranged the last six years of her life. We spoke in fits and starts over email, but I neither saw nor spoke to her from August of 2014 until her death in December of 2020. As she lay in a coma in Colorado, very near death from the combined effects of a stroke and Covid 19, my brother held a cellphone to her ear so that I could say goodbye. I'll never know if she heard me. Neither my name nor the names of my wife, children, nor grandchildren appeared in her obituary. If there was any type of memorial service (I'm pretty sure there was not), I wasn't invited. And I'm not sure I would have attended had I been invited- you know, Covid and all that...

So, as the reader might imagine, it takes me a minute to find a picture of her. There is a framed picture of her and my stepfather (who still lives- in fact he is the only living relative I have in that generation- but we don't speak) on the bottom shelf of the stack of shelves where we display family photos. This photo is in the back of a group of pictures- you can see it, but you need to know what you're looking for.

The pictures of my deceased father and step mother are on that bottom shelf as well. In fact, so are the pictures of my wife's mother and father, who are still living. The top and second shelves are filled with pictures of our children, their wives, and our grandchildren.

What do I owe to the people who are gone? I understand that the focus of this exercise is to focus on the people yet to come. But I need to start with those who have been and who are no longer. I need to wonder if they were concerned about what they might owe to me? And at what point did they feel that this obligation had been met?

As far as I know, only one of my great-grandparents lived long enough to know of my existence. And nobody was alive from the generation previous to that one. Did those people feel a sense of obligation to me? Not only am I of their clan, I am of their blood. Should I feel a sense of obligation to them? Should I feel a sense of obligation to my great-great grandchildren?

I find myself somewhat troubled by the concept of Effective Altruism as a point of morality. I was edgy while watching and listening to the lectures of Macaskill and of Singer. Both of them seem to stand on a mound of assumed moral understanding from which they might call us out for our potential failures. Neither of them passed a collection plate at the end of their sermons, but doing so would not have struck me as being out of character.

I don't think I am unique in wondering at what point did I stop being the child of somebody and start being a person in my own right, responsible for my own choices. When our children were little, my wife and I established that our job was to help them attain the age of majority with most of the choices of society available to them. In this way, societal avenues would not be closed off from them due to their choices as children and they would be free to navigate the world in a way of their own choosing. So perhaps my obligation through Effective Altruism ended when they went away to college? My relationship to them now that they are in their late 30s and early 40s is more that of peer than any type of mentorship. Do I owe them more than this?

And if the answer is "no" to my own children, how can I have an obligation to those with whom I have no relationship?

Outside my window, in the pond behind our home, two young ducks are at work paddling about, seemingly looking for food. As I watch, their parents paddle out from the foliage at the side of the pond

and seem to greet their children. Very soon the youngsters will fly forth on their own, ready to meet their own destinies. The parents' job appears to be nearly complete. When the young ones leave, will the parents miss them? Will the parents wonder if they have done enough to ensure their safety, to ensure that their lives might follow a path of their own choosing? Will the young ones feel gratitude to their parents for their summer of sacrifice to the children's benefit?

Is it morality that we seek when we speak of our obligation to future human generations? I can't help but think that an ethical obligation to the ducks would be for us to disappear, giving future generations of water fowl the opportunity to thrive without the obstacles humanity puts in their way. In such, Effective Altruism is a strictly human interest.

My mother is gone. One day I will be gone. Future generations will have an obligation to themselves. And that will be that.

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