

# **THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROBERT ETTINGER**

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Fooyin University, Taiwan

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DEDICATED TO  
**Robert Ettinger**

# **THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROBERT ETTINGER**

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## FOREWORD FROM CHARLES TANDY

### **Freeze-Wait-Reanimate!**

Charles Tandy

I first became aware of Robert Ettinger when I was an undergraduate college student in the mid 1960s. His recently published book, **The Prospect of Immortality**, was on one of my professor's "alternative" reading lists. It was not required reading but I was required to turn in a "critical analysis" of **some** book. As I recall, the paper I turned in was not "critical" in that I sided with Ettinger about the need to build an infrastructure for cryonic hibernation. To be sure, I did not use the term "cryonic hibernation" or "cryonics" because the terms had not yet been invented. Apparently my professor thought the young undergrad had read and understood the book, for I recall being pleased with my grade. About that time I also recall hearing a speech by our college president; in passing, he happened to mention Robert Ettinger as a forward-looking thinker. Too, I recall that some of my fellow undergrads used to good-naturedly greet me not with "How-are-yuh?" but with "Freeze-Wait-Reanimate!"

### **The Cryonics Movement**

The "cryonics movement" (as it is sometimes called today) was founded by Robert Ettinger. It got off to a shaky start, but its present infrastructure seems sufficient to insure that it is here to stay. With or without the help of Austin Powers (!), it has come a long way since the 1960s. Some of the cryonics organizations of the 1960s and 1970s survived and are now flourishing. Fortunately, some of the early cryonics organizations did not survive, thus bequeathing to the

twenty-first century a rather (ethically, legally, and financially) sound cryonics infrastructure.

One of the points Ettinger has tried to make from the beginning is that cryonics research, like cancer research, is compatible with a wide variety of life-philosophies. Each cryonics patient in cryonic hibernation, like each cancer patient undergoing cancer treatment, has her own unique philosophical and religious beliefs. Thus Ettinger would say that his own personal life-philosophy, whether deemed to be correct or incorrect, is but one of numerous life-philosophies compatible with the "can do" research attitude of modern science-technology. The life-philosophy of N. F. Fedorov is presented in Chapter Nine; Ettinger in the Afterword presents a differing life-philosophy.

### **Acknowledgements**

With respect to the present volume, let me first of all thank Scott R. Stroud for his diligent work. Without him, the task would not have come to fruition, at least not in **this** lifetime! I wish to thank the authors for their scholarly contributions to the project. And of course, without Robert Ettinger ... ! Let me encourage all of the above to consider the possibility of a Volume Two. Potential contributors may contact me at <[tandy@ria.edu](mailto:tandy@ria.edu)>.

### **About Charles Tandy**

Dr. Charles Tandy received his Ph.D. in Philosophy of Education from the University of Missouri at Columbia (USA) before becoming a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University (USA). Presently Dr. Tandy is Associate Professor of Humanities, and Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Philosophic Studies, at Fooyin University (Taiwan). More information: <http://www.doctortandy.com>

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Prisoner's Dilemma, Collective Rationality, And The Prospect Of An Indefinite Prolongation Of Life**

John M. Collins

#### **Introduction**

Robert Ettinger argues, in *The Prospect of Immortality*, that cryonic preservation of the newly deceased offers people the hope of being transported to a time when the technology exists that would enable them to be revived, and their presently untreatable diseases cured.[1] In *Man Into Superman* Ettinger theorizes that this indefinite prolongation of life will improve humans, both intellectually and morally.[2] Knowledge and understanding are accumulative, so our limited life spans limit us intellectually. Individual people could learn more and understand more of the world, had they the time to do so. Each academic field would benefit if it could retain its greatest minds for centuries or even millennia, rather than merely decades. Perhaps more controversial is Ettinger's view that immortality, or even the prospect thereof, would also usher in a "Golden Age" of morality. He thinks that we would try much harder to get along with each other, since we all would have so much more life to live for. Our intellectual advances also should improve us morally, he thinks. As we become less weak and stupid, misbehavior should become less common. Much bad behavior is the result of immaturity and ignorance, both of which should be in shorter supply when people live much longer. Ettinger is right, I think, to claim that "[m]any affronts to society, and to oneself, are simple misjudgments or failures to take the long view." [3] "The Golden Rule should work better for immortals than for humans, even as a mere tactic of expediency," he says.[4] These ideas have

been much defended and criticized. I will do neither here; instead, I will attempt to complement his case for the benefits of immortality by arguing that we should expect that if there were to be a serious prospect of immortality, that humanity would begin to behave more rationally, although not for the sort of reasons adduced, in the main, by Ettinger.

### **Rationality, Future Generations and the Prisoner's Dilemma**

My aim in this paper is to argue in support of the claim that the prospect of an indefinite prolongation of life will make humanity, to an extent, more *rational*. In particular, humans could be more rational in their decisions that have significant and predictable long term effects. Our dilemma, with respect to conduct that might impact future generations, is often a variation of the Prisoner's Dilemma. The prospect of immortality will bring the rationally self-interested aims of each particular human generation into greater convergence with the rationally self-interested aims of humanity of all generations.

Roughly, my argument is this:

1. To the extent that (the members of) a collective acts in ways that, all things considered, are not in the interests of (the members of) that collective, that collective behaves irrationally.
2. The interests of each particular generation of humanity differ significantly from those of the collective of all generations of humanity (past, present and future generations).
3. It is in the interest of humanity in general that each generation of humans acts in the interest not only of itself but also of generations of the distant future.

4. Frequently, a particular generation of humanity will act in its own interests, to the detriment of the interests of distant future generations.
5. If there were a realistic prospect of immortality, or even merely of an indefinite prolongation of life, the interests of each particular generation would differ from those of distant future generations less than they would without the prospect of immortality.
6. Therefore, were immortality or the indefinite prolongation of life to become a realistic prospect, humanity as a whole (the collective of all generations of humanity) would behave more rationally.

Suppose that you and an accomplice in some crime have been arrested, and you are being held in separate rooms, with no means of communicating with each other. A prosecutor enters the room, and tells you the following: “We suspect you, and the other person with whom we arrested you, of armed robbery. However, we only have enough evidence to convict you of a lesser offense, illegal possession of firearms. We will be able to send each of you to prison for two years on that offense. However, we’d like a conviction for the armed robbery. So I have an offer for you, but I’m making the same offer to your accomplice, and he knows I am making the offer to you as well. If you rat on your accomplice, and tell us he committed the robbery, and he does not rat on you, then we will let you go free, and we will convict your accomplice and sentence him to ten years. If you stay quiet, and your partner rats on you, he will go free and you will get ten years. If you both rat on each other, you will both be convicted of armed robbery, but you will each get just eight years, because you cooperated with the police. You must make your decision now. If you stay silent and your partner rats on you, you will be regarded as uncooperative, and any change in your testimony will have

no effect on either your sentence or your partner's. The same goes for any change in your partner's testimony. So, what do you say?"

This is the Prisoner's Dilemma.[5] Suppose the prisoner has no particular emotional attachment or feeling of responsibility toward his partner, and has no reason to expect any retribution from his partner's associates. Which action is the one a rationally self-interested agent ought to pursue? There are two ways of looking at it. A strong case can be made in favor of the rationality of accusing one's partner. No matter what one's partner does, one stands to improve one's position by incriminating him. If one's partner stays silent, one can avoid the sentence of two years and go free. If one is accused by one's partner, one stands to reduce one's sentence from ten years to eight by doing the same. It appears that it is rational to accuse one's partner.

Consider, however, that one's partner is in exactly the same circumstances, and presumably he is able to reach the same conclusion. Thus, if each of the prisoners acts in the manner that appears to be most rational, each receives a sentence of eight years. Were each of them to act in what seems to be the less rational way, each would end up with just two years in prison. What conclusion should we draw from this? I believe this demonstrates that there can be a divergence between what is rational for any particular member of a collective to do, and what is rational for the collective itself to do. Behavior that serves the interests of any given member of a collective who opts for it, may be self-defeating for the collective when all of its members opt for it. Any situation that is constructed so that this is the case is a variation of the Prisoner's Dilemma. There are many such cases we face in everyday life. We are all better off if drivers let other drivers merge into busy traffic. The delay to the courteous driver is minimal, in comparison with the aggravation of not being able to get on the road to begin

with. Since most of us would benefit more from receiving this sort of courtesy, than we would be inconvenienced by extending it, it is in the interest of drivers, collectively, for this sort of courtesy to be in place. But whatever the other drivers do, each particular driver stands to gain by not extending the courtesy. If all the other drivers are courteous, I will still benefit from that even if I do not reciprocate. If no other drivers are courteous, I would be a fool to be the only one who is. As long as cooperation is not enforced, and retaliation against those who are uncooperative is impossible, there is a divergence between what it is rational to do, considering one's actions in isolation, and what it is rational for the entire collective to which one belongs to do.[6] An arms race, such as that which occurred between the United States and the Soviet Union, is also a Prisoner's Dilemma. Both countries would have been better off had they been able to put some of the money for the military into, say, education. But each country, given the existence and unknown intentions of the other, may have been rational in spending the money on the military. Whatever the United States does, the Soviet Union can improve its relative position through increased military spending, and vice versa.

My concern here is the selection, by a generation of people, of a policy that has a significant long term effect. How should one generation of humans conduct themselves, when their actions will have an impact on future generations of humans? This, too, is a variation on the Prisoner's Dilemma. However, here the divergence is not between what is rational for an individual and what is rational for her collective, respectively, but rather a divergence between what is rational for one generation of people and what is rational for the collective consisting of humanity of all generations. As long as each generation pursues its own interests (and perhaps those of the near future), and those interests are significantly different from those of humankind of all generations, then humankind fails to pursue its own interests very well, and

displays a collective irrationality. It may be in the interests of any particular generation to rapidly deplete its natural resources, leaving little for future generations. But if this sort of policy is pursued by humanity in general, it is a self-defeating strategy.

Premise one is controversial, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend a view on which rationality is equated, more or less, with enlightened self-interest. I reject accounts of rationality that require only that an agent's beliefs, desires, decisions and actions cohere in a particular way; unlike, say, Hume, I believe that some passions, particularly self-destructive ones, are contrary to reason. While there are situations in which it is rational for one to put someone else's welfare ahead of one's own, I consider these still to be cases of the *enlightened* pursuit of one's interests. If you prefer, we could say that it is *prima facie* rational to pursue one's own interests, but that the rationality of this may be overridden by a consideration of the interests of others, particularly those to whom one is very close. However, when there are no such overriding factors, and the adopted policies are self-defeating, I will take the failure to act in one's own interests to be a departure from rationality. The individual prisoner who faces a dilemma like the one described above acts irrationally if he stays silent. To the extent that the Cosa Nostra follows the policy of silence, it behaves rationally.

I do not deny that there is a substantial overlapping of the interests of any particular generation with that of humanity in general, but merely that there is some divergence of interests, and that it sometimes transpires that a generation of people chooses its own interests, rather than those of future generations. Natural resources are squandered, the release of chlorofluorocarbons depletes the ozone, and so forth. These sorts of actions can be beneficial in the relatively short term (say, a few hundred years), but harmful in the long run. I

will take it that premises two, three and four of my argument are relatively unproblematic. (I will consider one problem for these premises in the section on the Non-Identity Problem, below.)

But how does immortality, or the realistic prospect thereof, reduce the divergence between what is rational for any given generation to pursue, and what is rational for humanity in general to pursue? Quite simply, this is largely because more members of these different generations will all be alive at the same times. Individuals and generations are more inclined to forego short-term goods in favor of long-term goods if they have a reasonable expectation of being around to enjoy those long-term goods. People would be more likely to be motivated to prevent the disastrous effects of global warming in, say, three hundred years, through changes in our fuel and energy policies of today, if they thought that there was much chance that they, or their children, would be alive in three hundred years.

It should be emphasized that I am not claiming that the first generation of humans for whom immortality is a realistic prospect will be more rational. I think it is an open question whether that generation would do a better job of serving its own self-interest. Provided, though, that this generation, and each successive generation, is as rational as the earlier generations of people for whom immortality was not a realistic prospect (or as rational as they *would have been* without a prospect of immortality), then the collective of all generations of humanity will behave more rationally. There is a suggestion of this view in *Man and Superman*, as Ettinger approvingly quotes Erich Fromm: “If the individual lived five hundred years or one thousand years, this clash (between his interests and those of society) might not exist or at least they might be considerably reduced. He then might live and harvest with joy what he sowed in sorrow, the suffering of one historical period which will bear fruit in the

next one could bear fruit for him too.”[7] Ettinger does not discuss the elimination of this clash of interests in much detail, though, and focuses on immortality’s implications for morality and intelligence, more than on rationality.

### **A Digression on the Non-Identity Problem**

I said above that I took premises two, three and four to be relatively unproblematic. Why the qualifier ‘relatively’? Derek Parfit’s famous Non-Identity Problem raises difficult issues related to the weight we should give to the interests of future people.[8] Parfit argues persuasively that many of our actions have a significant impact on the identities and number of future people. Jack’s failure to register for Philosophy 101 prevents him from meeting Jill, with whom he would have had many children. Instead, he becomes involved with Diane, and they have one child. It is not the case that if Jack had registered for Philosophy 101 that this particular child would have had a different mother, different birthday, etc. This child would not have existed at all; different children, produced from different gametes, would have been born. If rain had cancelled the church picnic at which my paternal grandparents met, very likely neither my father nor I would have been born. It will sometimes be the case that if some momentous event had not occurred, an entirely different group of people would eventually have come to exist. For instance, it seems very unlikely that there are many people under the age of fifty, if indeed any at all, who would have been born even if World War II had not been fought. Parfit says “In comparing any two acts, we can ask: Would all and only the same people ever live in both outcomes?”[9] If the answer is ‘yes’ we are faced with a Same People Choice; if ‘no’ it is a Different People Choice. Probably surprisingly few choices are Same People Choices.

How does this relate to premises two, three and, especially, four of my argument? Consider the adoption of a policy of

depletion of natural resources, instead of a policy of conservation of the same. Depletion will lead to a higher standard of living for a century or two, and thereafter a much lower standard of living. On the other hand, conservation will ensure a more stable standard of living, for the next couple centuries and well beyond, but one that is lower than would be immediately achievable through the policy of depletion, and much higher in the more distant future than would result from the depletion policy. If the current generation of people chooses the policy of depletion, are they acting in the interests of those future generations? Ordinarily, one would say that they are not, but if *all* the people of those future generations who would be affected by the depletion policy and endure lower standards of living would not have been born were it not for that policy (i.e., depletion or conservation is a Different People Choice of a very high magnitude), it becomes impossible to maintain that those very people would be adversely affected by the depletion policy. If they owe their very existence to the adoption of the depletion policy, rather than the conservation policy, then a strong case could be made that they have been *benefited* by the adoption of the depletion of the policy. Even if one rejects the contentious view that to cause someone to come into existence and consequently to lead a worthwhile life is to benefit that person, one cannot maintain that the adoption of the depletion policy *harms* those whose existence it is responsible for, provided that even with the lower standard of living, they have lives that are worth living, for they would not have been better off had the depletion policy not been adopted. They would have been, if anything, worse off.

Premise four, then, in particular, is no longer as obvious as it first seemed. A textbook case of one generation of people acting in its own interests, to the detriment of the interests of human generations of the distant future, is revealed as an instance of one generation possibly benefiting, and certainly

not harming, most of the people of the distant future. It is not simply because the depletion policy is a Different People Choice that paradox arises. If *some* of those future people who suffer through the lower standard of living begotten by depletion would have existed even if the depletion policy had not been adopted, then we would have clear victims of the policy. But if *all* those who suffer the lower standard of living would not have existed at all, were it not for adoption of depletion, there are no plausible candidates for the role of the policy's victims. The puzzle for Parfit, then, is to explain exactly why the depletion policy, or any other Different People Choice of the same sort, in which there are no plausible victims, is wrong regardless. The obvious answers are problematic. The wrongness of the policy could lie in the fact that if it is adopted, the average happiness level of humanity (whichever people happen to exist) of all generations is lower. This solution faces what Parfit calls the Mere Addition Paradox.[10] Suppose we compare outcome A and outcome B. In outcome A, a million people populate earth, and have a very high average level of happiness. In outcome B, those same million people exist, with the same average level of happiness. In addition, a million other people exist. This second group of a million also has a high average level of happiness, albeit a level which is a bit lower than that of the first group of a million. Suppose that the two groups do not interact, so the second million does not affect the happiness of the first group. In outcome B, the average overall level of happiness is lower. Should a society eschew a policy that would lead to outcome B, in favor of one that would eventuate in outcome A? The *mere addition* of (marginally less) happy people in outcome B hardly seems to make outcome A preferable.

The wrongness of the depletion policy could lie in the total quantity of happiness that results from its adoption, compared with the quantity of happiness that would result from the adoption of the conservation policy. Is the best

outcome the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of happiness (or of whatever makes life worth living), even if the average happiness level were lower? This seems to imply what Parfit calls the Repugnant Conclusion: that for every possible large population of people with a high quality of life, there is some much larger possible population whose existence would be better, even though all its members have lives that are barely worth living.[11] There is not yet a consensus as to whether any of the accounts of the wrongness of the depletion policy are satisfactory.[12]

Parfit's principal concern was morality, but there are similar problems in accounting for the *irrationality* on the part of humanity in pursuing policies such as that of depletion, since no members of the set of all humans would be worse off for humanity having pursued strategies like depletion. If all people are either better off under the depletion policy, or at least no worse off, and many owe their existence to the adoption of the policy, how can it be irrational for humanity to adopt such policies? Locating the irrationality of this policy (or of similar Different People Choices) in either the resultant average level of happiness, or in the resultant aggregate of human happiness (contrasted with that of the policy of conservation), will face problems analogous with those discussed above.

I take it, though, that the problem is *how to account for* the wrongness of the depletion policy, or the irrationality of humanity pursuing such strategies generally, rather than *whether* such practices are immoral or irrational. So I will consider it uncontroversial that if the policy of depletion results in both a lower average level of happiness, and a lower aggregate of happiness, for humanity, than adoption of the conservation policy would, it is morally wrong for a particular generation of people to adopt the depletion policy, and it is irrational for humanity *in toto* to pursue such policies.

It is worth noting, however, that the wrongness and irrationality of such policies would be easier to account for, were there to be a realistic prospect of immortality. In that case, the choice between depletion and conservation would still be a Different People Choice, but not *all* of the future people who would have to endure the lower standard of living that results from depletion would owe their existence to the adoption of that policy. If life spans could be prolonged indefinitely, some of those people who were already living when the bad policy was adapted would eventually be adversely affected by that policy. And indeed it would be more irrational for any particular generation of people to choose such a policy, knowing that it will hurt them in the long run. But I maintain that the irrationality, on the part of humanity in general, were such a policy generally pursued, is not dependent on there being any “victims” of the policy (i.e., those who would have been better off had the policy not been adapted).

## **Conclusion**

I do not claim that a generation of mortals with short life spans that chooses the depletion policy is thereby less rational than a generation of immortals that chooses the conservation policy. So we cannot expect that the first generation for which immortality is a realistic prospect will be a more rational generation than those that preceded it (at least not for any of the reasons I have discussed). Such a generation would be more likely to choose the conservation policy simply because that policy better suits its interests.

However, when each of the members of a collective pursues its own interests, and these interests differ from each other and from that of the collective as a whole, the collective may do a poor job of pursuing its own interests. Anything that allows a greater convergence between the interests of the

various members of a collective is good news for the collective, for that will facilitate behavior on the part of the members that will benefit the collective. An important choice, which once had been a variation of the Prisoner's Dilemma, now would be one such that if all the members of the collective choose as would be rational for those individuals to choose, the interests of their collective would be served. Were immortality, or an indefinite prolongation of life, to become a realistic prospect, it would be more rational for a society to eschew policies like depletion, which promise short term gains, but threaten long term suffering, in favor of policies like conservation of natural resources, since they themselves can expect to have a life in the distant future. Thus, they would be more likely to do what is in the interests of humanity in general.[13]

## Endnotes

[1] R.C. Ettinger, *The Prospect of Immortality* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965).

[2] R.C. Ettinger, *Man Into Superman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972).

[3] Ibid., 156.

[4] Ibid., 156-157.

[5] It is not an essential aspect of the dilemma that the prisoners are wrongdoers. They might have been framed, or they might be spies, acting in a just cause. And as we will see, variations of the Prisoner's Dilemma arise in many different situations, from driving courtesy to the arms race.

[6] Many have the intuition that the what is rational for a collective must be a function of what is rational for each member of the collective, or vice versa. This I deny.

Considering that members of a collective might have conflicting interests, it is hard to see this intuition as anything but an instance of the fallacy of composition or of division. One could deny that there even is such a thing as *collective* rationality (or morality, or what have you) precisely because of the marked differences between members of a collective, with respect to their interests, beliefs, desires, actions, and so forth. Or one could severely limit the applicability to collectives of such properties as rationality to situations in which all the members of a collective have the same interests and attitudes and in which the actions in question are uncontroversially collective actions (including, say, several people carrying a piano, but not including, say, a corporation's hostile takeover of a rival, if this takeover can be "reduced" in some sense to the isolated actions of a number of individuals). This limitation would effectively, if not theoretically, be a denial of the applicability of such properties as rationality to collectives. As this seems to be a departure from common sense and common usage, I will take the burden of proof to lie with those who argue against a notion of collective rationality, rather than with those who argue for one.

[7] *Man Into Superman*, 156.

[8] D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 351-441, *passim*.

[9] *Ibid.*, 356.

[10] *Ibid.*, 419-441.

[11] *Ibid.*, 381-390.

[12] For an excellent discussion of Parfit's problem, and a plausible solution to it, see Douglas Portmore's "Does the Total Principle Have Any Repugnant Implications?" *Ratio*

volume 12, number 1, 80-98. Portmore argues that there are several versions of the Repugnant Conclusion, and that the Total Principle (the principle which states that (ceteris paribus) the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living) does not imply the most repugnant of these, and that the versions of the Repugnant Conclusion it does imply are not actually so repugnant. If Portmore is correct, then an analogous account of the irrationality of the depletion policy should be available, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to assess Portmore's arguments.

[13] I am grateful to Richard V. Greene for his helpful comments.

### **About John M. Collins**

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