

JUSTICE FOR FUTURE DISCUSSING *TAKING TURNS WITH THE EARTH* BY MATTHIAS FRITSCH

EVA BUDDEBERG

Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Goethe-University, Frankfurt a.M.

eva.buddeberg@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Justice for future generations is a common topic in current political philosophy. But why do we owe anything to future, non-yet living people? This paper aims to critically reconstruct the main arguments of Matthias Fritsch's recent study *Taking Turns with the Earth*. For this, I try to illustrate Fritsch's main point, namely that we need an alternative ontology of time and space. I then follow Fritsch in his examination of Levinas' work and consider which precursors the ontology of temporality presented here may have in the philosophical and religious tradition. In addition, I reconstruct how Fritsch then—primarily with recourse to the works of Derrida—develops his two models of intergenerational justice, namely the “asymmetrical reciprocity model” and the “turn-taking model”. My evaluation of the basic purpose of the book is very positive. However, critical questions may arise with regard to how much time is actually left for such a rethinking on an ontological level. Further, we might also wonder to what extent the idea of taking turns could be further developed as a model for discursive exchange to generate concrete norms of action.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational Justice, Ontology of Temporality and Space, Asymmetrical Reciprocity, Levinas, Derrida.

Justice for future generations is a common topic in current political philosophy. But why do we owe to future, non-yet living people? This paper aims to critically reconstruct the main arguments of Matthias Fritsch's recent study *Taking Turns with the Earth*. For this, I try to illustrate Fritsch's main point, namely that we need an alternative ontology of time and space by referring to the current situation. I then follow Fritsch in his examination of Levinas' work and consider which precursors the ontology of temporality presented here may have in the philosophical and religious tradition. In addition, I reconstruct how Fritsch then—primarily with recourse to Derrida works—develops his two models of intergenerational justice, namely the “asymmetrical reciprocity model” and the “taking turn model”. My evaluation of the basic purpose of the book is very positive. However, critical questions may arise with regard to how much time is actually left for such a rethinking on an ontological

level. It could also be considered to what extent the second model also offers a model for discourse to generate concrete norms of action.

In recent weeks there have been frequent discussions about whether the restrictions on social life imposed by the COVID-19-pandemic could not have been avoided by isolating and protecting the “risk groups” instead. Apart from those who are already ill, these would mainly be older people. This proposal largely ignores the extent to which these groups of people in particular are dependent on support and care from others. They themselves may live with their children, who are in close contact with other children, but may also be (co-)cared for by their grandparents or other older people. And in general there are—also in western societies—families in which three or more generations live together.

This problem illustrates one of the basic theses that Matthias Fritsch very convincingly asserts in his very impressive study *Taking Turns with the Earth* with regard to the question of what we owe to future people: “moral and political relations with overlapping and non-overlapping future people [are] less anomalous than we often take them to be” (8). In Fritsch’s view, the current debate on intergenerational justice is characterized by the fact that “most methodologies in this area extend existing theories of justice, abstract from generational overlap or from historical time, or treat intergenerational relations as a special case.” (18) As long as we do not overcome this presentism, the questions of justice that arise with regard to people living in the future cannot be answered satisfactorily. Therefore he demands to rethink the ontology underlying the theories of justice. For just as the question of justice is not to be understood in national contexts alone but as a global question, so too its temporal focus on the present should be overcome.

In dealing primarily with the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, Fritsch wants to show in his work first that, “questions of justice ought to be understood as emerging with [...] a social time that separates but also links generations” (7). For this, according to Fritsch’s further central assertion, intergenerational justice should be understood as “a form of indirect reciprocity”. Fritsch describes this, especially in the third chapter of his book, more precisely as “asymmetrical reciprocity”, according to which we, the presently living, “owe future people *both* because of their needs or interests *and* because we received from the past” (8). Intergenerational justice is thereby further to be understood as “generational turn-taking”. This turn-taking, for which he wants to plead in his book and which is already mentioned in the title of his book, includes “institutions as well as the natural environment”. (8) Since human life is “always already intergenerational”, “moral, social, and political relations” do not take place “among the living alone”. For all social relations are affected by “dependencies, asymmetries, and unknowns” determined by birth and death, and “[t]he dead and the unborn, as well as the earth, are co-implicated in the presence of the currently living.” (15)

Fritsch's work is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, he is first concerned with the identification of ontological problems and methods in the debate on intergenerational justice (IGJ). From Fritsch's point of view, these evoke the fundamental question, "[i]s there a relevant difference between spatial and temporal absence? Can we say the dead and the unborn are simply absent, while living contemporaries are simply present?" (37) Or is it not rather the case that "the gulf separating us from the other generations is not as big as we think"? (42) Fritsch assumes that "generational relations are necessary for moral and political agency" (43). In order to show this, a "social ontology of the ineluctability and origin of normativity, or justice" (43) is needed, which he begins with an interpretation of our mortality: Only because we are mortal beings "life, values, action, and virtues" play a role at all (45). Thereby, as Fritsch emphasizes with Levinas, subjectivity is always "co-constituted by a futural demand to let others have possibilities for life beyond my death. Agents must have a relation to future people for access to their own world of action and meaning: to being." (46f) Mortality, as we could paraphrase Fritsch here, thus does not only imply one's own finiteness, but also the possibility of one's transcendence in survival through others and in others. This thought of Fritsch's could also be understood as an intersubjectively applied reinterpretation of the idea of the immortality of the soul, an idea that is possibly as central to the meaningfulness of one's own actions and to the question of morality as the idea of one's own finiteness.

However, not only mortality, but also natality, as Fritsch further emphasizes following Hannah Arendt, is not a singular event, for humans are, in the sense of this ontological as well as biological category, "not born once and for all but rather remain in the process of being born. Agency [...] is thus intrinsically connected to biological natality, the fact of being born" (48) The continuing reference to others should therefore not only be understood as cultural heritage "in the form of language, culture, norms, habits, and institutions" (50). Rather, as natal beings we are also dependent on "asymmetrical, corporeal, intimate relations, care for material and symbolic needs, and so on" (50)—and not only at the beginning and end of our life: Natality and mortality are continuously effective in life and "[t]emporal alterity structures our relations even to the living" (51). Consequently, future generations are no longer a "different category" but their demands on us are "exemplary of moral normativity" in general (51). In this context, future generations or future other are also not to be understood as absent, but, Fritsch suggests, following a formulation of Derrida, as "'spectrally' present". (52) This "spectral presence" of others is shown, among other things, in the fact that "we can see many of our projects as depending upon being taken up by future people, including non-overlapping future generations" (53). It is also expressed in the political institutions "we share with at least some of them" (53), but also in "traditions and languages" and "habitats, climates, and the earth" (53f). Fritsch sees another form of this spectral presence of non-living generations in the way we live with the mortality and death of others. Also

with regard to natality, the connection between the generations transcends the generations—hence our responsibility towards children also implies their responsibility for their children: “to take responsibility for those who are to outlive me in the present is thus to equip even more distant future people to address their future-related obligations.” (55) Admittedly, the first, more urgent task lies in obligations towards close generations, but “not only their needs and interests but also the needs and interests of more distant people” are to be taken into account (55). At the same time, “the source of morality in temporal alterity” implies “that we cannot, in the end, locate the generational origin of obligations so precisely as to neatly distinguish between the dead and the unborn, or overlapping previous and future generations.” (58).

In the second chapter, Fritsch now attempts to question in more philosophical detail “the presentist assumption” of the Intergenerational Justice Debate in confrontation with central figures of Levinas’s thinking, “by rethinking and explicating the very ground of responsibility in general”. (64) For with Levinas we could understand that “[a]lter and ego are related to each other in a time they do not simply and wholly share and in which they thus cannot engage in reciprocal and symmetrical exchange of benefits and debts, or rights and duties” (67), as is often assumed above all in the understanding of justice shaped by analytical philosophy. Also in contradistinction to Heidegger, Levinas describes “the very being of the human subject” as “being-for-beyond-my-death”. (67) We experience mortality primarily in the other, i.e. radically separated from us. In such an interpretation of mortality, Fritsch sees an intersubjective extension of the “long philosophical tradition that associates time with sensibility, receptivity, and mutability” (70)—an interesting thesis, which Fritsch, however, does not elaborate here for reasons of space. One could again consider how the idea of the immortality of the soul fits into these ideas of time and otherness, as well as the extent to which it ties in with non-linear, but also not purely circular ideas of temporality that have been handed down especially in Judaism.

One could object that Levinas’s approach itself does not formulate any obligations towards future humans, or if at all, these are only indirectly addressed here. Against this, Fritsch himself argues that Levinas’s approach, although or precisely because he places the face-to-face relationship at the center of his analyses, allows us to question the presentism of the current philosophical debate, since he always understands the capacity to act, responsibility, and sociality in terms of the future. The aspect that the other, even as a present other, is always already temporally separated from us, “renders the temporal distance to future people less anomalous.” (81)

Central with regard to the debate on intergenerational justice is the argument already mentioned above that responsibility—infinite for Levinas—“includes the responsibility for the ‘child’s’ responsibilities for its ‘children’ and their responsibilities, opening up to an infinity of generations” (81)—whereby this should not be

understood as being tied to kinship relations. With reference to Levinas's figure of the third party, Fritsch further argues that "future people in a more generic and impersonal way" have to be considered (83). On the one hand, we always encounter the other "within the context of cultural-historical notions that will have begun to abstract from the singularity of the other." On the other hand, these terms would lose any "ethical or political import without their constitutive relation to the singular individuals who alone can be moral and vulnerable, and who stand in significant relations to others, including members of future generations." (84) Such an emphasis on Levinas's figure of the third is not fundamentally new, but in Fritsch's analysis it gains a further dimension with regard to future others. Fritsch warns that "the interest in justice for future people should not lead us to forget the abstractness of this notion ('future people,' 'future generations') and the 'spectral presences' and transitive mediations by way of which we are already responsible for those who come after us, overlapping and unborn." (85)

As important as Levinas's figures of thought are for Fritsch's sketch of an alternative ontology, he nevertheless criticizes his thinking, in particular the fact that he himself has again dualistically thought the relationship between totality and infinity. In continuation and further development of Derrida's motifs Fritsch develops his two own models of intergenerational justice in Chapters 3 and 4: first the already mentioned model of asymmetrical reciprocity (Chapter 3) and then the model of taking turns (Chapter 4).

Not only Levinas's, but also Derrida's work is notoriously not easy to understand. And thus the theses developed subsequently to Derrida at least present a challenge to reader less familiar with his work, although the basic ideas they contain are so convincing that one is happy to take up the challenge after all: Fritsch begins the third chapter with a rereading of Marcel Mauss's theory of gift. Every gift transcends its giver to the extent that the giver always gives something that goes back to other people and to others in general. Yet it is precisely "these enabling factors of her ability to give" that also co-constitute her as a person (116). While the gift transcends the giver and at the same time also constitutes her, also the recipient cannot simply keep the gift because, as Fritsch reconstructs Mauss, "the spirit of the thing wishes to return to its origin [...]" (118). For Fritsch this shows the connection between an ontological and a normative assertion: "because the gift is not entirely assimilable, the recipient *should not try to fully assimilate it and make it his own alone*". (119) Thus following Mauss, Derrida and Fritsch we cannot help but accept a gift and at the same time have to pass it on, if only because it cannot be fully accepted — whereby it remains largely open, indeed must remain open, *how* we must or should pass on what we cannot appropriate.

Fritsch tries to relate the inherent reference of giving, receiving, passing on, which is always to be considered in the gift, to our way of existence as a whole. In the following, he brings perhaps Derrida's most famous figure of thought, *différance*,

into play. This, Fritsch explains, is called “the quasi-transcendental condition of the identity of things as well as subjects. [...] If an identity can come to be established only as a result of spacing, that is, by differing from other elements, then these other identities form a necessary and necessarily preceding context...” (127)

Also as an alternative to modern contractualism and the idea of a state of nature, which we have fortunately left behind in the state, nature is to be understood as a lasting *context*, “in which alone subjectivities, human and nonhuman, can come to affirm themselves” (137)—we can neither leave it behind nor become completely independent of it. Thus it is less a matter of becoming sovereign in relation to it by leaving it behind as a state of nature; rather it is “to respond to fear and finitude by discovering its inseparability from a promise in nature to pass on to the future the gift of a human world, or human earth, despite its own finitude.” (137).

In Fritsch’s view, this could be achieved by understanding reciprocity as an asymmetrical claim. With this consideration, he links up with other models of indirect reciprocity in that he too assumes an “intergenerational chain”: “each generation addresses the next as one that is to be carried on the project of justice in an iterative manner.” (140) To describe this reciprocity as *asymmetrical* however should first of all emphasize that we can never give back what we have received in an economic sense. Yet, on the other hand, this restriction is also intended to point out that giver and receiver do not remain identical with themselves: even if one’s own children worry about their parents at some point in time, neither the children nor their parents are who they once were—just as their concern for their parents is not simply the return of the parental care for their children. In addition, Fritsch is also interested in using the idea of the gift, which goes back to Mauss and Derrida, to question the not only in economic thinking widespread idea that individuals owe both their talents and their labor to no one but themselves. Instead, it should be acknowledged that these foundations are also only *given to us* by nature, heritage and family, i.e. that they always precede the individual and are only realized in the return and passing on to others.

This model of intergenerational justice as asymmetrical reciprocity is further developed and supplemented by the model of “taking turns” in Chapter 4 of Fritsch—like the gift, Fritsch also wants this term to be understood ontologically. On the one hand, this model of intergenerational justice as *taking turns* offers “an appropriate way of conceptualizing the intra- and intergenerationally shared nature of democratic institutions” (156). At the same time, however, it can be extended to our environment, the earth, with which the generations are in ever-changing interrelations.

This also has consequences for the future of democratic societies. At least since Hans Jonas’ *principle of responsibility*, political philosophy and the media have repeatedly expressed concern that democracy could fail in the face of ecological challenges. Fritsch, however, by no means advocates opting for other political forms. Rather, he argues that democratic institutions should also be consolidated against

presentist tendencies, on the one hand by withdrawing them more strongly from economic pressure and, on the other, by extending them to the entire globe. Thus, democracies must preserve their sovereignty over time by understanding this sovereignty itself as global and intergenerational.

Admittedly, the question arises here to what extent, in view of the urgency of ecological questions, there is still enough time to initiate such a fundamental learning process at the ontological level: Can the idea of sovereignty, which dominates all political thinking in modern times, really be transformed quickly enough that the major threats of the present can still be averted? But this question is not intended to call into question the fundamental correctness of Fritsch's efforts to readjust the debates in political theory on intergenerational justice at the ontological level; rather, it is intended to emphasize how *urgent* such a rethinking is if political philosophy, which, with its emphasis on the present and the idea of sovereignty, has certainly contributed to the crises of our time, does not want to be late with the *turn taking*.

This central figure of thinking about intergenerational justice is further differentiated by Fritsch: On the one hand as Turn-Taking 1 (T1—"Given the noncoincidence of the present time, no identity is simply given. Any self must, from the beginning, seek to return to itself, promising itself to its future self." (166)—as on the other hand as Turn-Taking (2): "There is no guarantee that the future self will be the same self, and in fact, given the differential constitution of identity in a life-sustaining context, to seek to return to oneself is also (at the 'same' time) to turn toward the other. [...] Despite the sovereign bending, the turning never comes around full circle; it remains a 'half-turn' [*demi-tour*] ... or a 'quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self'" (167) Fritsch associates the first movement with the thesis expressed by Tocqueville, that "[t]he people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe" (167). Political sovereignty in the sense of T1 thus consists in maintaining continuity over time, even if individual bearers die, and passing it on to others born after them (168). In addition, the second movement illustrates that every self-affirmation always requires the confirmation of its context, "without which one could not be what one is, and that means to welcome unconditionally the future to-come as an alterity within oneself." (167) On the other hand, T2 emphasizes in the terms of natality and mortality the turning towards the other: "coming to terms with death means accepting to co-inhabit the world with vulnerable others whose very mortality calls for 'nonviolence' [...], and for an 'anterior affirmation of being-together [...]' as the 'law of originary sociability [...]" (169)

Particularly with regard to democracy, Fritsch emphasizes how important it is to think of both forms of turn taking as being connected: "Democratic constitutions and institutions demand both circulations at once" (167) Democratic institutions may well be more or less open to the alterity that has always been contained in them and that constitutes them. Fritsch's ontological descriptions thus increasingly turn

to the normative: democratic institutions would correspond better to their own essence if they were less presentist and less self-referential, but “more welcoming of its inevitable unconditional exposure to other times and life-sustaining environments” (168) Fritsch leaves open and must probably leave open the question of whether and how democratic institutions can be capable of such a shift in weight between the movements that constitute them.

Fritsch’s book is an attempt to steer the debate on intergenerational justice in a different direction through a different ontology, also in order to change our understanding of justice. Again Fritsch quotes Derrida—here in his somewhat elliptical formulation from *The Spectors of Marx*: what “we are calling here *justice*, must carry beyond *present* life, life as *my* life or *our* life. *In general*. For it will be the same thing for the ‘my life’ or ‘our life’ tomorrow, that is, for the life of others, as it was yesterday for other others: *beyond therefore the living present in general*.” (quoted here after Fritsch, 169) In this, it is once again very clear that we cannot think of ourselves much less the question of justice without including the future and thus the future living—just as we cannot have a full account of justice within national borders. Questions of justice arise only against the background that we are social beings, and thus they also arise from the very beginning as intergenerational questions. The overlap between generations is not a special case that theories of intergenerational justice can simply ignore. Therefore, it is important to think of democratic assent not only in terms of one individual related to one other but also in terms of other generations—a thought that has probably reached Realpolitik in the meantime, thanks to Greta Thunberg and the generation of Friday for Future, among others, and is expressed in the current demands to further reduce the voting age.

Fritsch extends his model of taking turns even further: in addition to the *temporal* takeover and passing on between generations, Fritsch is also interested in describing our relationship to our environment and the earth as one aspect of taking turns: individual people as well as generations emerge from their environment or “the earth” as they return to it—and not only or just at the beginning and end of their lives, but rather in continuous exchange, for example when they breathe, eat, drink, etc. All these forms of turn-taking are interrelated: “In fact, intergenerational communities, especially those that are broadly democratically institutionalized, exist in a mode of turn-taking that also takes turns with the natural environment, and whose normativity may be explored on this basis.” (172)

To think of intergenerational justice also in the form of this turn taking implies a “certain humility of power”—whereby Fritsch, together with Derrida, also draws on the etymological connection between *humus* (earth) and *humility*—to express “the finite, natal-mortal character of sovereignty. From the vantage point of this finitude as the origin of normative sociality, we can begin to see that certain holistic, encompassing elements that we share are no mere instruments of human endeavors.”

(175) Thus it becomes clear that both individuals and generations are dependent on a life-sustaining context. And in this feeling of humility expressing our ongoing dependency lies perhaps a first answer to the question of to what extent democracy is capable of changing the movements that constitute it.

For Fritsch, three normative levels can be distinguished: First of all, on a quasi-ontological level, there is this double affirmation of life forms, individuals, generations, but also of democratic institutions. On a further level, forms of double affirmation can be identified in Fritsch's ideas of asymmetrical reciprocity and taking turns with view to intergenerational justice. On a third level, these are then to be further developed and concretized as specific norms. Here, Fritsch leaves open whether double affirmation here may also be understood in the form of turn taking—such as in discursive exchange—between individuals, generations and possibly, at least as objects of these norms, also animals or nature.

In the fifth and last chapter, Fritsch now puts earth and worlds into a relationship. He argues: “if living beings in general have their being constituted by turning to contextual others in seeking to return to themselves, then these contextual others are not just nonpresent human generations, but nature or earth. Earth is one name for the ‘hetero’ in the auto-hetero-affection that defines life” (186). For, firstly, life cannot be separated from death, but is always already “life-death”; secondly, it always emerges from the earth and returns to it, and indeed—thirdly—also not only at the end of life, but continuously. The movement of the *différance* is equally characteristic of the earth. For it is a comprehensive context not only around the living, but also in those whose context is the earth. Thus, Fritsch recognizes that, with our striving for identity, a striving also comes into the world that Nietzsche called the will-to-power and Derrida an “unconditional ethical obligation” (197). This “obligation out of alterity” is, according to Fritsch, significant for inter-generational justice as well as for environmental ethics: ethics, if I understand Fritsch's argument correctly, begins precisely with this call of responsibility out of alterity, and this without us being able to give a reason for it ourselves; our connection with the earth cannot be overcome. To absorb the earth completely, to appropriate it would mean to make *différance* and thus human life impossible (200f). We cannot help it, so, as Fritsch emphasizes, we must pass on the earth to future “life-dead”. For since life is not only in the self, but beyond that in the other and is always directed towards the future, and since it does not simply and at once stop with the death of the self, it is always also a matter of survival, of the continued existence of its context. Fritsch formulates this as follows: “while life can only seek to live by stretching itself out to a future it affirms as the future of its self-preservation [...], it thereby opens itself to the incalculable future to come that necessarily alters the self by routing it through its context, a context that cannot but reconstitute that self. *Différance* defers the living present to a future it cannot make its own, a future that hands the self over to an inappropriable alterity.” (207)

Faithful also in his style of thinking to Levinas and Derrida, Fritsch ends his book with the question whether “human sovereignty” could not be thought differently, and, instead of an answer, he poses a new, hypothetical question: “what if sovereignty took seriously both the in-earthed human condition and intergenerational natality and mortality—the condition by which one has to inter the remains of the other and be interred by others in turn, both at the level of the individual and the collective level of democracy, with and beyond the nation-state?” (213). In this way, as I understand Fritsch, he is passing on to his readers the task of taking up this question, pursuing it further and perhaps returning an answer to it, an answer which is certainly not a final answer, but one which at best contributes to further considering the urgent questions raised by this book and thus to taking them into account ...