

DECONSTRUCTING PRESENTISM NATAL-MORTAL BEING AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE IN MATTHIAS FRITSCH'S *TAKING TURNS WITH THE EARTH*

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ABSTRACT

Matthias Fritsch's *Taking Turns with the Earth* draws on phenomenology and deconstruction to develop two models of intergenerational justice. In this review paper, I consider the way in which, in making the argument for these models, Fritsch moves from ontological claims about the necessarily temporal and relational character of identities to normative claims about the way in which we find ourselves situated in webs of intergenerational obligations. The book thus shifts the starting point for theorizing intergenerational justice by rejecting the assumption that moral relations normally arise between contemporaries. It is, on the contrary, insofar as we are natal-mortal beings, vulnerable and dependent in virtue of our embodiment, that we are moral agents. This is a powerful framework for thinking of intergenerational ethics. I consider a skeptical challenge to Fritsch's interpretation of the ethical implications of deconstruction in order to highlight what is original and compelling in his position.

KEYWORDS

Presentism, natal-mortal being, deconstruction, ontology, normativity, gift, intergenerational justice.

Matthias Fritsch's excellent book, *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction and Intergenerational Justice*, addresses an urgent set of issues in the context of what ethicist Stephen Gardiner has called the "perfect moral storm" that is climate change.¹ The explicit aim of the book is to propose two models for conceptualizing intergenerational justice that redress the problematic "presentism" implicit in many existing approaches. The cogency of these proposals and, notwithstanding the complexity of the philosophical arguments supporting of them, the impressive clarity

¹ Stephen Gardiner (2013)

of their presentation, make the book a significant contribution to the field of environmental ethics. But Fritsch also accomplishes some secondary goals that, I think, have broad significance for ethics and philosophy more generally.

First, I think Fritsch's proposals concerning the meanings of "environment," "world," and "earth," entail a fundamental challenge to the traditional bifurcation of nature and value.² In the course of outlining his first model of intergenerational justice, which he calls "asymmetrical reciprocity," Fritsch offers an analysis of the *gift* (drawing on the work of Marcel Mauss, as well as on Jacques Derrida's deconstructive appraisal of it) that entails a compelling alternative framework for thinking about questions of value in environmental philosophy (i.e., questions of intrinsic value vs utility, as well as related questions about sustainability, resources, and ecological preservation). In this context, as throughout the book, Fritsch demonstrates that axiological and normative commitments are connected to ontology and shows that a deconstruction of the metaphysical opposition of agentive subjectivity and objective "nature" opens up new ways of thinking about responsibility and moral obligations. Further, in this discussion "earth" emerges as the irreducible ontological matrix for the constitution of our identities and agentive capacities. Fritsch thus develops an account of the relation of culture, politics, and nature, that I think makes a significant contribution to recent discussions about ecology and democratic theory, or what Bruno Latour has called the "politics of nature."³

Second, the book powerfully demonstrates the resources that continental philosophy can bring to bear on normative questions of ethical and political life. It shows how phenomenology and deconstruction, in critically appraising the ontological assumptions of modern thought, also challenge the "possessive individualism" that is its socio-political corollary.⁴ Key to this challenge is the understanding of time that emerges from a century of thought in phenomenology and deconstruction. From Heidegger's account of the ecstatic temporality of being-toward-death to Derrida's thinking of time in terms of *différance*, Fritsch shows how continental philosophy invites us to think about our time—our historical time, and the time of our personal lives and agency—as already thoroughly *intergenerational*. The time of our birth and of our death, the times of our ancestors and descendants, are co-constitutive of our present, and it is the originary interrelatedness entailed by this natal-mortal time, Fritsch argues, that makes us moral

² One might be tempted to think that it would thus run afoul of the so-called naturalistic fallacy. We won't have time to get into it here, but Fritsch compellingly defends his Derridean approach to normativity from this charge in Fritsch (2011, especially section 6).

³ Latour (1999)

⁴ This concept and its association with early modern philosophy and political thought is famously associated with the work of C.B. Macpherson (2011)

beings. In short, the book compellingly argues that the question of intergenerational justice is not merely a regional problem in ethical and political thought, but rather goes to the heart of the matter of ethics.

In what follows, I want to focus on this second theme, which will of necessity involve passing over a number of the book's significant insights and propositions. But I think that the argument for his ethical frameworks hangs on the normative implications that he draws from key ideas in phenomenology and deconstruction. My particular focus will be on Fritsch's claim that it is insofar as we are natal-mortal, generational, beings that we are moral beings.

The scope of Fritsch's concerns is made evident in the Introduction, when, having outlined the scale of the climate crisis and its possible consequences for our offspring and more distant descendants, he identifies the particular challenge to which his proposals respond: "These temporal and terrestrial interpellations," he writes, "call on us to reconceive human power and sovereignty in relation to the geological and atmospheric forces on which we depend, and to rethink present time in the context of long-term intergenerational relations."⁵ Rather than proceed simply by considering intergenerational obligations and responsibilities to be a special class of ethical problems for which contemporaneous ethical relations would be the paradigm, Fritsch proposes that in order to rethink the character of intergenerational responsibilities we must begin from a rethinking of "present time." Let us pause over that proposition for a moment.

Common approaches to intergenerational ethics often proceed from the assumption of a moral domain defined by the contemporaneousness of agents and those with moral status (as objects of moral concern). The challenge then for ethical theory would then be either to work out how moral relations so defined can be extended to future persons, or to appeal a kind of timeless universality that, by abstracting entirely from face-to-face relations, would avoid differentiating between presently living persons and the unborn.⁶ Fritsch enumerates a number of classic problems associated with such approaches. Among these there is the fact that we lack crucial, ethically relevant, knowledge about future generations and the world they will inhabit. Further, for ethical theories that presuppose some sort of reciprocity, exchange, or contract, between moral agents, it is difficult to see how one might conceive ethical relations with the unborn. Perhaps the most significant difficulties, in the context of the framework that Fritsch ultimately develops, are those that he calls problems of "world-constitution."⁷

⁵ Fritsch (2018, p. 6)

⁶ Fritsch discusses these different proposals in the first chapter of the book (2018, esp. pp. 38-43)

⁷ Fritsch (2018, p. 59ff.)

The difficulty here is not simply that we lack epistemic access to the world of future generations, it is that our present choices shape the world they will inherit, and in that sense also shape the identities of those who will inhabit it. For example, my ancestors emigrated from Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. Their choice to do so (alongside millions of others whose migration in the twentieth century occasioned a massive lifeworld transformation on a global scale) is co-constitutive of who I am, for better or for worse. But for this reason, I am in no position to evaluate the morality of their choice with respect to my interests, and neither were they. In short, that choice is the condition of my own identity and agency; my capacity to pass judgment on it necessarily presupposes it. The point here is that there are no *identifiable* future persons whose interests we might take into account from our present standpoint.⁸ From the standpoint of common intuitions and some classical ethical theories, this poses a significant problem for a theory of intergenerational justice.

With respect to classical models of intergenerational justice, Fritsch's argument calls for a radical change in perspective that would obviate some of the above-mentioned concerns. This is indicated when he turns to Heidegger's account of the ecstatic temporality of "being-toward-death" and its connection to responsibility and agency:

Heidegger argued that to be an agent means to grasp one's present time not as "is" but as "to be," full of (inherited) potential to be actualized (in the future). Such realization of possibilities, however, demands understanding my life as mortal, for otherwise no choice would really rule out another.⁹

What Heidegger helps us to appreciate is that the time of a life, the time in which we must accomplish a kind of self-identity through the enactment of meaningful projects, of agency, is necessarily a finite time, oriented throughout its duration by concern for that finite condition. This Heideggerian insight has three important implications for Fritsch's argument: first, it anticipates the Derridean deconstruction of a self-identical and self-originating subjectivity; second, in connection with this, it anticipates the deconstruction of the very *presence* of present time, opening the possibility for rethinking the relations of "generations," and; finally, insofar as it entails the proposition that simply *to be*, as an agentive "I can," is always already to have been, so to speak, *assigned a task* of being oneself, it problematizes the distinction between "is" and "ought" in ways that we shall consider below.

Fritsch goes on to show how Heidegger's finitude is critically appropriated by Emmanuel Levinas who emphasizes the necessarily intersubjective character of our relation to

⁸ Fritsch (2018, pp. 59-63).

⁹ Fritsch (2018, p. 44)

our own death. In tension with Heidegger's insistence on the solitude of one's relation to one's own death, Levinas shows how the temporality of a life is oriented by a kind of restless "being-for-beyond-my-death."¹⁰ The basic idea here is that, as an agent, I am also constitutively dependent on others to carry forward the sense of my projects and commitments; precisely in virtue of my inescapable mortality, I am as it were *invested* in a temporality that transcends my finitude.¹¹ And this is no less true at the social level of collective identities—not only *my* time, but *our* time is necessarily stretched toward an open future. Agency relies upon the supplement of futurity to sustain the senses of projects: this includes what we might call personal life-projects, but also institution-building, political struggle, cultural production, collective labour. As Fritsch summarizes:

Only an open future coming to me from the other being, thus beyond me, allows the disclosure of a meaningful world in which my agency can come to birth. My agency is thus referenced in its very constitution to a world beyond its time, to a time beyond its world.¹²

This point lays the foundation for a revision of our understanding of moral subjectivity. It entails that moral agency and responsibility arise only within an intergenerational context.

Fritsch's discussions of Heidegger and Levinas show how our time is, fundamentally, *mortal* time. They are concerned with the *futural* character of finite temporality and historicity. Fritsch then turns to Hannah Arendt to develop an account of the way our temporality is also conditioned by our relation to our own contingent beginnings in the form of what Arendt calls "natality." And here, too, Fritsch's interpretation of these canonical insights from the phenomenological tradition puts the accent on their implications for understanding the fundamentally relational, intersubjective, character of our condition. Whereas Arendt conceives natality as a condition of agency insofar as it involves a kind of interruption of historical time, allowing for genuine novelty, for inaugurating acts, Fritsch, drawing on Adriana Cavarero, shows that natality entails a dependence of our agency on others. Emphasizing the relation to the maternal body, to care-givers, and to the material conditions of survival, the concept of natality names

¹⁰ Fritsch (2018, pp. 44-47). Fritsch discusses the idea of "Being-for-beyond-my-death," and its implications for intergenerational justice, at length in Chapter 2.

¹¹ The sense I have in mind with "investment" here draws on the terms older ecclesiastical meaning in which it marks the *investiture* of cleric in a new role, with its particular authority, traditions, and responsibility, through the donning of particular *vestments*.

¹² Fritsch (2018, p. 79)

an irreducible condition of “being-from-others.”¹³ Challenging the tendency in liberal political thought, and even in much ethical theory, to privilege the “upright,” contractual, relations of self-determining individuals, the discussions of being-for-beyond-my-death and being-from-others show that vulnerability, exposure, and dependence are not contingent, but rather necessary conditions of agency. Summarizing this idea, Fritsch writes, “[s]ociality reaches deep into the very constitution of agency.”¹⁴

Coming to a central argument of the book, Fritsch then considers the logic of this intergenerational dependence and transfer through an examination of the gift, giving, and givenness. This theme is central because it brings together, on the one hand, the logics of inheritance, debt, and future-directed responsibility, and, on the other, a quasi-ontological reflection on our relationship to nature, the earth, or what is often generically referred to as “the environment,” and then tries to develop the normative implications of these connections. As we indicated earlier, one of the difficulties with which theories of intergenerational justice must contend arises from the non-contemporaneity of the parties to the relationship. There can be no straightforward reciprocity between different generations, particularly when these do not overlap. This means that any attempt to conceive intergenerational debts, obligations, or transfers, requires one to conceive of a form of transfer in which one party (A) gives something to another party (B) who is then somehow obliged to pass the gift along to a third party (C). This involves a form of transfer that clearly departs from the usual economic conception of exchange, and that is often referred to as “indirect reciprocity.” Since, in the case of indirect reciprocity across non-overlapping generations, A is not around to demand a return or equivalent value in exchange for what was provided to B, it is difficult to conceive the nature of the indebtedness, or obligation, requiring B to pass something along. Fritsch’s analysis of this problem proceeds through a reading of Marcel Mauss’s famous 1925 comparative anthropological study of gift-giving practices across different so-called “archaic” cultures.¹⁵ As Fritsch points out, Mauss believed that the anthropological evidence concerning gift-giving practises reveals a mode of transfer or exchange, including intergenerational transfers,¹⁶ that, while binding the parties to the transfer in a kind of debt-relation, precisely does not conform to the classical logic of *economic* exchange (where A provides something to B in expectation of an equivalent return). The comparison of gift-practices to economic exchange is also of central concern in Derrida’s deconstructive appraisals of Mauss’s argument.

¹³ Fritsch (2018, p. 50). The term is from Cavarero via Lisa Guenther (2008).

¹⁴ Fritsch (2018, p. 46)

¹⁵ Mauss (2000).

¹⁶ Fritsch (2018, p. 111)

Without going into too much detail, I want to highlight what for our purposes is a particularly important theme in Fritsch's reading of Mauss/Derrida.¹⁷ According to Mauss, in contrast to objects of economic exchange, the gift, in the context of traditional gift-giving practices, is not typically thought of as being in the possession of the giver, nor does it come to be unambiguously in the possession of the receiver as a result of the donation. Mauss famously employed the Maori term, "hau," designating something like a "spirit" animating the gift-object, to name the way in which a gift comes to embody the community—including ancestors, and even the land—from which the gift 'originates.'¹⁸ The donor draws on these sources in offering the gift, and the gift retains its constitutive relations to those sources as a kind of occult property. Fritsch shows how this power—entailing a certain inappropriability of the gift in virtue of these ineradicable relations to its sources—constitutes, for the recipient, a kind of assignation. This leads to one the book's characteristic transitions from the descriptive register to the normative:

The recipient *cannot* (in all of its senses, from factual to normative) keep (all of) the gift because its *hau* makes it foreign to him, and not entirely assimilable. A normative claim follows from this ontological one: because the gift is not entirely assimilable, the recipient *should not try to fully assimilate it and make it his own alone*.¹⁹

How do we get from the "is not" to the "should not" here? In thinking through the logic of the gift, Fritsch is trying to work out the ethical implications of his phenomenological and deconstructive account of natal-mortal time. His reflection on the inappropriate gift, as conceived through his reading of Mauss and Derrida, occasions a crucial transition from the *descriptive* account of our dependence, as agents, on others (past and future), to the *normative* claim that this dependence somehow involves us in a debt relation, a relation of indirect exchange in which what is never really ours to give is nonetheless owed.²⁰

A key point here is the fact that our own agency is itself dependent on the gift.²¹ This means that we are in a certain sense constituted by the gift-giving, and it is this that accounts for the gift's inappropriability.²² A good example here is that of language. My

¹⁷ The discussion of Mauss is the subject of the third chapter of the book. Mauss, Derrida, and the gift is also discussed in Fritsch (2015).

¹⁸ Fritsch (2018, p. 116)

¹⁹ Fritsch (2018, p. 119)

²⁰ This, as we shall see below, is part of what motivates the move from indirect reciprocity to asymmetrical reciprocity—we are in a certain sense dependent on the gift that we must pass on.

²¹ Fritsch (2018, p. 122)

²² It is also what distinguishes the economy of the gift from that of calculative exchange or "restricted economy." We shall return to this point below.

inheritance of the English language as a mother tongue, in a certain sense binds me in a relation to my forebearers; it is of the nature of this gift that it allows me, and indeed even *requires* me, to direct this inheritance toward others. After all, in being initiated into the tradition of English speech, it is not exactly as though someone gave me something as a possession that I might hold onto, or that I might then be obligated to surrender to another who would in turn take possession of it. Rather something is made available to me as a kind of bequest that is at the same time the condition of my own agency; this bequest, including the necessity of its being directed onward toward others, is the condition of my being able to bear it. This sense of our relation to language, as investing us in a constitutive relation of gift-transfer, is powerfully captured in this English translation of a poem, written in Irish, by the poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, entitled “Ceist na Teangan” (“The Language Issue”):

I place my hope on the water
 in this little boat
 of the language, the way a body might put
 an infant

in a basket of intertwined
 iris leaves,
 its underside proofed
 with bitumen and pitch

[...]

only to have it borne hither and thither,
 not knowing where it might end up;
 in the lap, perhaps,
 of some Pharaoh’s daughter.²³

This poem gestures toward the way in which an historical language conditions the identity of the poet. Consider that, given Irish Gaelic’s history of colonial subjugation, it is not at all inconceivable that things might have come to pass historically such that there would be no Gaelic speakers to read this poet’s words, no one to *receive* the gift of her language. In that case, it would be as though the very agency of writing and speaking had been emptied of its sense. The poet’s agency is realized in this act of entrusting the inheritance, an infant in a floating basket, to an incalculable dissemination. It is only through this passing-on of the gift that the poet is able to effect of a kind of return to herself in hearing herself speak, in what Derrida calls an auto-affection. As

²³ Ní Dhomhnaill (1990, p. 135)

Fritsch writes, “[i]nheritance, then, is to be understood not on the model of a privileged presence—it is what it is—but as *to be*, actualisable from the future *to come*.”²⁴ The gift-relation is *at once* a kind of ontological condition and a normative injunction.

I want to pause here to consider a possible objection to this transition between the descriptive and normative registers. At one crucial point in the argument, Fritsch foregrounds the way in which Derrida uses “*Il faut*” (“one must”) when he is speaking of our relations to the future, to the other, or to the logic of the gift (as in “one must” pass on the gift, “one must” not try to appropriate it, etc.).²⁵ In using this phrase, Derrida plays upon the way in which it can hover between the descriptive and the normative modes (or, as Derrida himself sometimes puts it, between the constative and the performative). The ethical implications of this have been a matter of some controversy in the literature of deconstruction.²⁶ The issues are too complicated to be given proper consideration here, and in any case I believe that one of the strengths of *Taking Turns With the Earth* is that, rather than simply rehearsing this debate—which would make it mostly of interest to continental philosophers, and Derrida scholars in particular—it puts the interpretation of deconstruction that Fritsch has developed in other contexts to work on urgent issues in a way that, I think, helpfully engages the broader world of ethics scholarship. But I do want to note some of what is at issue in the debate because, as I have suggested, much of the force of the argument with which Fritsch makes the case for his two models of intergenerational justice hangs on the way he interprets the normative implications of deconstruction. Martin Hägglund, in contrast, has established something of a reputation for his bluntly deflationary reading of the ethical implications of deconstruction and it is useful to consider his views here as those of a skeptical interlocutor.²⁷

In a 2011 essay focussed on the question of normativity in deconstruction, Fritsch explains how the “quasi-transcendental infrastructure” uncovered in Derrida’s writings from the late 1960’s (the concepts of the trace, *différance*, etc.) entails two different senses of futurity.²⁸ As is well known, Derrida coins the neologism *différance* in order

²⁴ Fritsch (2018, p. 149)

²⁵ Fritsch discusses the significance of this characteristic Derridean formulation (2018, p. 122).

²⁶ The debate has involved Derrida himself, of course, but also Simon Critchley, Martin Hägglund, Samir Haddad, John D. Caputo, Ernesto Laclau, Francois Raffoul, Drucilla Cornell, and many others, as well as Fritsch himself.

²⁷ The critique of ethical readings of deconstruction—including those of Simon Critchley and John Caputo—is laid out in Hägglund (2008), but developed in a number of other articles, many of which respond directly to critics of his argument. For example, Hägglund (2011),

²⁸ See Fritsch (2011, p. 452ff.). To economize on space, I attempt over the rest of this paragraph to summarize Fritsch’s already rather condensed summary of Derrida’s ideas here.

to designate the problematic conditions of sense. In the terms of structural linguistics we can say that a signifier gets its sense from its diacritical relations to other signifiers within a structural context. But a signifier also gets its sense from the history of its actual uses in speech acts. There are thus two different senses of *context* here involved in a kind of mutual presupposition. On the one hand, use of a signifier presupposes the *structural* context organizing its diacritical relations to other signifiers; on the other hand, languages, as structures, presuppose a *historical* context of actual speech acts. Further, these two contexts cannot be indifferent to each other: each iteration of a sense in a speech act (or in writing) constitutes a new *historical* context, thereby altering, however minutely, the relation of each signifier to its *structural* context. The dependence of sense on speech acts (or, what Derrida, more generally, calls marks) thus exposes the structure to inevitable change, preventing any final determination of sense. *Différance* thus combines, in one term, the sense of the relations of *difference* within a system and the inevitable *deferral* of sense implied by the ceaseless openness of that system to its own transformations.²⁹ We can thus see how *différance* implies two different senses of futurity: first, the future of difference is a kind of waiting-upon, or anticipation-of, events, in which the event, in its singularity, must provide its own context of interpretation, so the waiting must be without condition; second, since I would not even be able to recognize the event without some context of sense, the future implied by difference is a kind of more or less determinate framework of intelligibility projected in advance. The experience of futurity inescapably involves both senses: the future as expected in virtue of projected horizons—structures, laws, discursive formations, concepts, institutional arrangements—and the future as unanticipatable events, always to come (*à-venir*).³⁰ There is an irreducible incommensurability between these two futures—as unconditioned, what comes is not even a what, never arrives as such, always exceeds the horizons of expectation. The coming of the future implies that one must be open *and* that one must impose the conditions of sense in terms of which one must try to, as it were, measure up to events. The “one must” here involves what Derrida calls a double-bind, a double-injunction pulling us in directions that are not only opposed, but opposed in such a way that each side of the antinomy conditions the other.³¹

²⁹ And it is the mutual ontological priority of the horizon (structure) and the event that prevents us from treating the horizon simply as a transcendental. The differential relation of mutual conditioning here is what leads Derrida to speak of a “quasi-transcendental” (see Fritsch [2011, p. 454]).

³⁰ In his later writings Derrida speaks of this form of futurity as a “messianism without messianism” (1994, p. 73) and even as a “quasi-transcendental ‘messianism’” (p. 168).

³¹ The logic of *différance* is of course outlined in the essay of that name (Derrida 1982) but the basic issue it is also developed in many contexts throughout Derrida’s oeuvre. The concept of the auto-

The question is, to what extent can this structure of antinomy (which is at work in some form wherever meaning is at stake) really be read as a *normative* issue? Is there a matter for *ethical decision* here? Hägglund has criticized attempts to privilege the unconditional demand to be open to the future and thus interpret the “one must” as particularly enjoining openness to the other. Against this ethical interpretation, he argues that the description of the double-bind does not allow us to assign it any prescriptive or normative valence. As Hägglund repeatedly insists, it is not as though one can say that it is *better* to be more welcoming of the other since the other may way turn out to be a murderer who destroys the very conditions of hospitality. And a serious commitment to hospitality would have to make reasonable provisions for that possibility and thus, paradoxically, decide to impose limits on hospitality.³²

Hägglund is thus focussed on the way in which the normative implications of terms like democracy, hospitality, justice, and the gift, conceal the aporetic character of the quasi-transcendental infrastructure of *différance*. He writes, for example,

When Derrida analyzes the “unconditional” in conjunction with highly valorized terms, such as hospitality and justice, he is...not invoking an unconditional good. On the contrary, he seeks to demonstrate that the unconditional spacing of time is inscribed within the conditions for even the most ideal hospitality or justice.³³

Now, I do not think Fritsch would have any reason to dispute this interpretation insofar as he (Fritsch) does not make the mistake of taking Derrida to be opposing unconditional hospitality (as good) to conditional hospitality (as morally deficient). Derrida clearly means to point out the ambivalence of these terms in virtue of their quasi-transcendentality. But Hägglund seems to conclude from this that Derrida reduces the normative content of “hospitality” to a descriptive point about how we are always already hospitable, like it or not, insofar as we cannot help responding to, even if only in the mode of awaiting, what comes (unconditionally). For example, he writes, “[u]nconditional hospitality is...another name for the violent alteration of time, which opens me both to what I desire and what I fear.”³⁴ Beyond describing the inescapable terms in which we are faced with worldly dilemmas, deconstruction, on Hägglund’s reading, has no real stake in the question of whether, in a given case, it is better to be more hospitable by, say, opening borders, or whether it is perhaps better to be more cautious by building security perimeters. Hägglund even suggests that Derrida might have avoided

immunity of democracy, for example, is in one sense another version of this antinomy arising from quasi-transcendental *différance* (Derrida 2005)

³² For example, see Hägglund (2008, pp. 104-5)

³³ Hägglund (2011, p. 138)

³⁴ Hägglund (2008, p. 104)

some of the confusion produced by his use of “‘positively’ valorized” terms like “hospitality” and “justice” if he had instead used “‘negatively’ valorized” terms like “violent exposition” or “irreducible discrimination,” which would have conveyed the same senses without lending themselves to ethical readings.³⁵

It is clear how Häggglund’s deflationary reading of Derrida’s use of ethico-political categories would apply to questions of intergenerational justice. Adopting Häggglund’s interpretation, we might say that while the quasi-transcendentality of natal-mortal being entails that I am constitutively situated in a web of intergenerational gift-relations, and we might also agree that any attempt to identify a present generation will implicate past and future generations and will thus fail, this does not entail that benevolent future-directed commitments (e.g., an intention to make provisions for the well-being of non-overlapping future generations) are *preferable* in some normative sense. To be a little more precise with our example, it would not entail that it is somehow better to make provisions for the future than to, say, direct all one’s efforts and attention to the problems of fairer wealth-distribution among the currently living, while leaving the unborn to sort things out for themselves.

This sort of challenge is evidently on the horizon throughout the book; at a number of points, Fritsch circles back to the question of the normative implications of deconstruction. And I think that he makes a compelling case against the kind of deflationary reading we find in Häggglund. As we have suggested, the key to Fritsch’s position is his emphasis on what Derrida, in *Politics of Friendship*, calls an “anterior affirmation of being-together,” a “law of originary sociability.”³⁶ In elaborating these notions, Derrida refers to “a sort of heteronomic and dissymmetrical curving of social space—more precisely, a curving of the relation to the other...”³⁷ This *curving* is another way of trying to get at what we spoke of earlier as a sort of originary *investment* in our relational condition—we find ourselves oriented toward the other in a normatively relevant way. Derrida here writes, “We are invested with an undeniable responsibility at the moment we begin to signify something.”³⁸ We might say that in the act of signifying, the inheritance of a language makes a claim on our agency; it makes of our act a kind of performative reactivation of a promise or a commitment: you can trust me. I *find myself* committed to the promise, an appeal for the faith of the other.³⁹ Of course, this represents a challenge to common intuitions about ethical agency and decision-making.

³⁵ Häggglund (2008, p. 105)

³⁶ Derrida (2005, p. 231), cited in Fritsch (2018, p. 169).

³⁷ Derrida (2005, p. 231)

³⁸ Derrida (2005, p. 231)

³⁹ It’s critical here that performativity be understood as something like Butler’s performative.

If we assume that ethics only applies to a being who can choose among alternative courses of action and who thus must *will* the good (as in Kant's notion of "good will"), then ethics would seem to presuppose the possibility of a voluntary *decision*. This deduction would tend to support Hägglund's critique of ethical readings of deconstruction insofar as Derrida famously deconstructs the notion of a sovereign, voluntary, subject. If we can say that I *must* grapple with the problem of being open to the other (unconditionally) by imposing certain conditions, it is because I find myself always already resolving this problem in virtue of my exposure to the spacing of time, *not* because I am the origin of decisions concerning how to deal with this problem. But Derrida challenges this common intuition about ethical agency when he says that a sovereign subject would in fact be incapable of responding to otherness; its self-grounded self-identity would condemn it eternally to its own self-sameness, to rigid adherence to a law it would have always already given itself (auto-nomos).⁴⁰ This is why he says: "[a] *theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the least decision*"⁴¹ For there to be a de-cision (in its Latin origin, implying a cut), there would have to be a point at which no law, code, or algorithm would suffice—i.e., we would have to be responding to the singularity of the event in *its own* terms. Thus, Derrida says, a "*passive decision*," an "originarily affected decision" must precede any decision of which I could claim to be the agentive source.⁴² As moral agents we must already find ourselves within inherited structures of meaning that we cannot fully appropriate but that invest us in a context of normative valences—they are, like a mother-tongue, gifts that are also constitutive of our own identities as agents, and the always-challengeable frameworks of intelligibility through which we engage with, and make sense of, our world. These structures (which are not ahistorical, abstract, or transcendental in the Kantian sense) are at once prescriptively oriented (they are 'to be' ongoingly enacted) *and* conditions of one's own identity and agency. The passivity of the passive decision, the germ of heteronomy that it deposits in my very autonomy, is what alone allows me to break from automatism, a fixed code or law that I would mechanically repeat. The differential dissemination of the inheritance in terms of which I am identified, also opens my identity to its others, thereby also opening the possibility of coming back to myself across different contexts, of identifying myself as one responsible for my decisions or my ethical obligations.

This logic of inheritance and promise, reflected in any ethical decision, implies a kind of transcendental temporality while also underlining the empirically specific ways

⁴⁰ Derrida (2005, p. 68). In fact, eternal self-sameness, in Derrida's thought, would be equivalent to death.

⁴¹ Derrida (2005, p. 68)

⁴² Derrida (2005, p. 68)

in which that temporality is actuated for us—texts, traditions, institutions, concepts, practices, technologies, economic arrangements, relations to our ecological contexts. This is why Derrida thinks about politics by working through the particular inheritance of democracy. In facing the dilemmas of democratic life (say, how to balance the demands of hospitality to refugees with concern for security) we are not surveying from above, choosing among normative frameworks in order to apply them. We might rather say that we come to ourselves through the resumption of a task, and that task consists, in part, in grappling with the constitutive interrelatedness of our identities. Though, as Hägglund rightly argues, deconstruction certainly cannot provide prescriptive solutions to particular political or ethical problems, it does affirm that we are never in a neutral position with respect to the demands of justice and political life. One must grapple with otherness, and while this entails that unconditional openness (welcome) and absolute closure (secure self-containment) are both impossible, and thus incoherent as normative commitments or projects, the recognition that they are both incoherent *insofar they would involve a failure to respond to our constitutive interrelatedness* is a normatively significant outcome of deconstruction. And this is why we might say that while “democracy,” since its emergence in sixth century Athens, is subject to the vagaries of history and often conflicting interpretations, its persistence attests to the way in which, in virtue of *différance*, we are inescapably haunted by others and by the task of learning to live with them, which is first and foremost to let them live. Concerning intergenerational justice, Fritsch’s interpretation of deconstruction shows how the constitutive inheritance of the aporetic demands attested to by the tradition of democracy orient us normatively toward future others; this insight of deconstruction exposes the metaphysical illusions of possessive individualist presentism and the way it functions as an alibi for indifference. According to Fritsch, we find ourselves in a nexus of intergenerational gifting in which concern for the future—contingently oriented by inherited normative frameworks—functions as a condition of our own agency. We find ourselves, we are instituted in our own agency, in grappling with how to discharge an incalculable intergenerational debt.

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