

# TAKING TURNS WITH FRITSCH: ON INTERGENERATIONAL TIME AND SPACE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is an appreciative examination of Matthias Fritsch's significant new book, *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice* (Stanford, 2018). After analyzing the temporal axis of Fritsch's intervention into the question of intergenerational justice in the context of the ecological crisis, I extend it to a complementary spatial analysis by following some of the book's important cues. I develop this in terms of some recent North American Indigenous philosophy, including Winona LaDuke, Glen Sean Coulthard, and Leanne Simpson.

## **KEYWORDS**

Matthias Fritsch, intergenerational justice, ecological crisis, indigenous philosophy.

Thoughts cannot penetrate the vast blue sky,  
Snowflakes cannot survive a red-hot stove.  
Arriving here, meet the ancient teachers.<sup>1</sup>

Matthias Fritsch's *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*<sup>2</sup> is a significant, illuminating, and timely—just in time, perhaps—phenomenological and deconstructive ontology and “hauntology” of the

<sup>1</sup> K'UO-AN Shih-yuan, “The Ox-Herding Poems,” *Zen Sourcebook*, ed. Stephen Addiss with Stanley Lombardo and Judith Roitman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), 88. This is the eighth of ten Ox-Herding poems.

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Fritsch, *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. Henceforth TTE.

problem of intergenerational justice. To my mind, it is the widest ranging and most profound work on this problem that I have so far encountered.

Fritsch works to avoid a seemingly ever-present feature of the Anthropocene, namely, “intergenerational buck-passing” (TTE, 2) in which, for example, we bequeath future inhabitants of the earth an increasingly catastrophic climate, a severe depletion of natural resources, a massive assault on biodiversity (the Sixth Great Extinction), and increasingly inhospitable living conditions. This leads him, directly and indirectly, to implicate broad swaths of contemporary intergenerational justice theory (with some notable exceptions like Stephen Gardiner, from whom he rightly takes some inspiration) in some of the deep and often covert operating assumptions that are complicit with the very problems that the theory seeks to resolve. Notable among these assumptions is a conception of the human being as an atomistic, self-interested consumer, bereft of obligations to past or future generations, that ethicists subsequently try to oblige to a past and a future that are not present to it. Such an individual is shaped by an economic and political system where tomorrow is just another opportunity for growth, and yesterday is like last week’s bread, stale and already forgotten. If the past can be repackaged and repurposed as part of tomorrow’s growth, say, for example, if we can generate a market for antique bread, then we stand between the past and the future. This standing is always a self-standing, the “presentist phantasm” that we first exist “as if giving birth” to ourselves (TTE, 2-3) and in which the past and future revolve around our current self-interest.

I think that it is not too great a stretch from Fritsch’s project to claim that capitalism is a global regime of self-serving theft, that is, taking possession of what was not given to possess. In the Derridean aporias of gift giving that Fritsch activates, *we are given the earth, but not to own*. The question of justice consequently challenges us to consider that we have stolen the gift precisely by claiming that, in receiving it, it is ours to own. We are living *in* and *as* the Kleptocene rather than the Anthropocene: kleptocratic consumption as a geological catastrophe. “But short-term thinking and disregard for noncontemporary generations seems rather germane to industrial, capitalist modernity, with its claim to draw its ethical resources only from itself, rather than from inheritance” (TTE, 3-4).

Fritsch’s intervention into, and radical contribution to, intergenerational justice theory, therefore, is nothing less than to reconsider the human being on an ontological scale, both in terms of its temporal social being as intergenerational and the normative force of such an articulation. If the context of issues like global economic inequality and global climate change demand that we extend our thinking beyond its narrow individual or national boundaries, it also demands that we extend it beyond the present and hence it is “a reconsideration, both social-ontological and normative, of the role of

time in human life” (TTE, 6). That is, a conception of human beings in which “we are nonpresentist, generational beings” (TTE, 7).

In careful readings of Heidegger, Arendt, and Levinas—with frequent interruptions and complications by Derrida—Fritsch ontologizes and normatively activates the social constitution of the human being by exposing its “natal mortality” (TTE, 55). The former locates natality and the genesis of novelty and innovation in relationship to what has come before and the later to what is always still to come. “If birth relates us to previous generations, and death to future generations, then we are ‘generational beings’ (in Anne O’Byrne’s felicitous formulation” (TTE, 50). We do not invent our social being or worldliness out of whole cloth but rather inherit them (their practices, traditions, languages, and modes of intelligibility), that is, we are “thrown” into worlds not of our making, but out of which new possibilities can be born. We are given the worlds into which we are born and out of which we act. Simultaneously, our future extends beyond our participation in it, yet it is that to which we leave (and donate) the worlds and the earth that we inherited.

This is both ontologically constitutive (it makes us what we *are*) and normatively formative—“we owe backward and forward, and indeed in such a way that the two are hard to distinguish” (TTE, 50-51). I can only discharge the debt going forward by “opening” myself “to a future” (TTE, 59) that will be comprised of others that I will not accompany. The extension of my social being and worldliness to futural worlds beyond my participation in them takes us beyond Heidegger’s congestion of mortal futurity into my responsibility before the nothingness that is my own most (TTE, 72). Levinas importantly counters that, in the ethical relationship, the future is not nothing and it does not belong to me, but rather to the others still to come and hence “belongs to an interpersonal realm that is already in the process of outliving the individual” (TTE, 73). The interpersonal realm was left to me and I leave it to the others who are still to come. My death reveals to me that “there would still be a time that is not for me but for the other to come” (TTE, 76). The command not to murder, moreover, from an immemorial past to an unimaginable future, “yields a thickly historical sense of an ethical connectedness across generations in both directions” (TTE, 94). It is the future that will continue our projects, but then again, we too were once the future that inherited and took up the projects of the past.

But what do we inherit and what do we give to future generations? How does one donate or, prior to that, receive a world? How do we think this intergenerational gift? In what I regard as the book’s most inspired stroke, Fritsch analyzes the gift, which is given and received, but in both cases without the giver or the receiver being able to “possess” it. The giver gives what is not theirs to give and the receiver receives what is not theirs to receive. Revisiting Marcel Mauss’s famous anthropological analysis of the

gift and its implicit demand that we revisit, amid the ravages of capital, a gift economy, and combining it with Derrida's striking deconstruction of it, Fritsch develops an account of the gift which obligates one to the past that constitutes one, but which cannot be possessed, either by the giver or the receiver. Fritsch calls this circulation in which "(past) A gives to (present) B who 'returns' the gift to (future) C" "asymmetrical reciprocity," meaning, *inter alia*:

First, if A's gift is co-constitutive of B (i.e., is part of what allows B to *be* B), then B cannot ever fully repay the debt . . . Thus, the gift remains inappropriable, excessive, and asymmetrical for B, who therefore must also free herself from the debt in some way. (TTE, 108)

The "constitutive alterity" (TTE, 119) that makes me what I am is not something that I can possess, but it does render absurd that I would possess myself or the earth that also constitutes me. "Because a donor is also, and first, a recipient, she gives a gift that neither she nor the recipient or the recipient of her gift can have or take in its entirety." This is what Derrida felicitously calls "the enigma of giving what one does not have" (TTE, 131). This enigma in which the gift, which was neither a gift that the giver owned nor a gift that can be owned by the recipient, but which nonetheless, in being received, constitutes the world and bioregional ecological living conditions of the recipient, and obliges the latter to give the gift anew.

If one generation . . . can become what it is only by accepting gifts from previous generations, and if this acceptance obliges a return, then paying it forward, as the apt English expression has it, appears as the most obvious way to attempt to meet one's intergenerational obligations" (TTE, 138).

Fritsch's ontologization of our intergenerational social constitution and its simultaneous normativity (our responsibility for a past that we inherit but cannot own, like language, tradition, and the earth itself, and for a future to which we owe the gift of what we inherited and, where necessary, enhanced and healed) reconfigures the very normative question to which intergenerational justice is an answer. It shifts it from "What kind of equivalent do we owe forward?" to "What is it to take a fair turn with X?" (TTE, 155; see also TTE, 14). The earth is not my possession, but I have received it, and I will leave it to others. It was not put at my disposal to own and do with as I please, but rather it incurred a debt that can only be discharged toward the future. Even if I give the gift back, I am paying it forward because I am giving what I received and in so doing altering the constitution of the future recipient, even if she is also the original giver.

Hence, I do not *own* the gift, but rather *take a turn* with it. "It's no longer just a question of what kinds of things and how many of them, or how much in terms of equivalence, we owe future people, but of what it is to take a fair turn with holistic

objects with future people” (179). Rather than the spatial axis of assimilating and consuming the gift, Fritsch argues that “sharing should take the temporal form of taking turns,” what Aristotle articulates in *Politics* (1261a and 1287a) as *κατά μέρος* (TTE, 155). This intergenerational sharing that constitutes and normatively orients us, grounds our natality, and positions us toward a future that will not include us, refuses both “presentism” (including the present generation’s exclusive regard for its own interests) and “human exceptionalism” (the anthropocentric bias that we only have obligations toward our own species, or what Peter Singer in a different context called “speciesism”).

Yet what we pass to future generations implicated within our temporal constitution cannot be done piecemeal. We cannot parcel out the gift as if we are dividing our possessions in our last will and testament. Not only am I giving a gift that I cannot possess, I am also giving a holistic gift that I cannot divide.

The major reason for this inappropriateness is the holistic nature of the object: dividing it into parts would destroy it as the functioning object it is. While we usually cut up a cake to share it, we do not normally dismantle a bicycle or a house to share its parts. Rather ... we take turns riding or inhabiting it. (TTE, 174)

The temporal axis of *taking turns* dismantles the presentism of the Modern notion of “man as the master and proprietor of nature.” The unpossessable gift from time immemorial transforms receipt of the gift to manifest not as what I now own and can take for granted, but rather as taking turns with an earth that is “on loan from the future” (TTE, 177).

At the generally tacit heart of Fritsch’s intervention is the mounting sense that the current political and economic Global Disorder has failed to acknowledge that the receipt of the gift is to incur a debt and an obligation. The unfolding ecological catastrophes and our seeming helplessness before them points to a global political and economic crisis. What would the global General Economy of the Gift look like? It would require other books to articulate the debt incurred by this question, and answers, given that the debt is paid forward to times and peoples not yet knowable and still to come, are both fragile and demand pliability. Nonetheless, the ineluctable first step is to pose the question, which Fritsch memorably does by turning to the German economist Wolf Dieter Enkelmann, who takes up Derrida’s intervention and reflects that

In the end, what is at stake is a kind of sustainable world economy. The question regarding the gift of the given brings into economics the question of how there is the world, instead of simply pre-economically presupposing the world as given by nature or by God. World economy then becomes economy *of the world* instead of just being economy *in the world*, for whose existence and maintenance one is . . . not responsible. (TTE, 153)

This was also at the heart of the more radical and thoughtful versions of deep ecology. Taking what we know from the science of ecology, we can then ask philosophically about the kinds of politics and economics that are appropriate to the bioregions within which and because of which we are taking our turn. But how do we take our turn with an economic and political order that enables us to do so fairly? What does a political economy *of the world* look like? What manner of democracy enables us to pay forward the debt incurred by the gift of the earth—in itself unpossessable and therefore not ours to receive or give, yet which nonetheless constitutes us, albeit discontinuously and without “linearity” (TTE, 214) as the earth takes its turns with us as well?

Fritsch’s perspicacious reading of Maus and Derrida’s engagement with the problem of the gift also allows us to appreciate that some clues for alternative political economies can be found in some indigenous cultures. Of course, such cultures, almost universally under assault, are shocking and deplorable examples of how our dominating cultures of the last few centuries have failed to meet even our minimal obligations to them under the admittedly low bar of a presentist account. Yet their resilience and resurgence, as well as their re-articulation of their place in life-worlds that have violently colonized their original life-worlds, are not only laudable and inspiring in themselves, but also offer considerations that amplify our appreciation of Fritsch’s important work.

Winona LaDuke, of the White Earth Reservation in Northern Minnesota and two-time vice-presidential candidate for the Green Party, argued that indigenous resilience cannot be separated from healing the lands that help constitute indigenous cultures. When Congress finally passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, for example, the assumption was that Indigenous Peoples could now freely practice their long suppressed religious rites and traditions. However, this Act was blind to the rootedness of indigenous spiritual worlds in the spatial or earthly constitution of those worlds. It “did not protect the places where many of these rituals take place or the relatives and elements central to these ceremonies, such as salt from the Sacred Salt Mother for the Zuni or salmon for the Nez Pierce.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, the cruel and utterly intentional effect of the reservation system was to divide what could only be inherited and paid forward holistically. They could not take turns with their sacred lands because they were divided from the lands that constituted them spiritually, culturally, and physically. “By the 1930’s, Native territories had been reduced to about 4% of our original land base. More than 75% of our sacred sites have been removed from our care and jurisdiction.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Winona LaDuke, *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>4</sup> LaDuke, 14.

The land base of many indigenous people was not land that they owned, but it was land that was given to them and, as such, constituted them. Colonization and genocide stole the futurity of indigenous worlds not only through murder, but also through dividing and appropriating the lands that constituted indigenous worlds. This is to steal the time of the future by stealing the place of a human future (inhabitable earth), as was the case in the dispossession of indigenous lands, but which is also the case in the stance of humanity as the “master and proprietor of nature.”

Glen Sean Coulthard, in his profound study, *Red Skin, White Masks*, argues that the dispossession of indigenous lands (unpossessable gifts) by settler colonial states engaged in what Marx called “primitive accumulation,” the violent transition period of the land and wealth grab where the few take possession of the means of wealth production. For indigenous peoples, this meant the appropriation of their lands. If the appropriation of labor is the theft of time (one works to live and lives to work), then the appropriation of the commons (the place of the many becoming the property of the few) is a program of *spatial* alienation. Coulthard embraces the Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr (*God is Red*) in his insistence that for indigenous peoples it is place, not time, that occupies the highest meaning.<sup>5</sup> Without place, we cannot realize the temporality that constitutes the intergenerationality of gift giving. As such, Coulthard argues that place was experienced as “grounded normativity” that was “deeply informed by what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms” (RSWM, 13). The loss of the *place of one’s being* is even more important than stealing time by exploiting the proletariat. The “place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others . . . In the Weledeh dialect of Dogrib, ‘land’ (or *dè*) is translated in relational terms as that which encompasses not only the land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on. Seen in this light, we are as much a part of the land as any other element” and hence these relations entail ethical responsibilities and obligations (RSWM, 61).

The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg (constituted by lands now colonized as parts of Ontario) teacher, leader, and scholar Leanne Simpson also argues that the healing of the lands that ancestrally and contemporarily constitute the Nishnaabeg people—“to restore balance, justice and good health to our lands”—also “requires a disruption of the capitalist industrial complex and the colonial gender system (and a multitude of other institutions and systems) within settler nations by challenging the very foundation of the

<sup>5</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 60. Henceforth RSWM.

nation-state and its relationships to the land and Indigenous nations.”<sup>6</sup> Re-emergence must carry forth and pay forward through the dense obfuscation of centuries of imperial violence and the dispossession of the lands, languages, and traditions that is the *ancestral gift of who they are*. Yet, strikingly, the Nishnaabeg have the audacity to commit not only to meeting the needs of today, but to those of a future ten generations away (DTB, 67).

Of course, Fritsch is explicitly aware that he is extending the spatial dimensions of intergenerational justice to include an ontological and normative account of their temporal ones. I suspect that finding a way forward will require developing the skills to think both together (the spacetime that Fritsch strikingly develops from Derrida in the concluding chapter).

I found the book’s pervasive mood of gratitude for the Ancestors and the generosity that such a mood inspires to be captivating, reminding me of the famous concluding line of George Eliot’s (Mary Ann Evans) *Middlemarch*: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” The “constitutive alterity” of our lives and worlds are indebted “to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life.” If we see only ourselves—the delusion of the atomistic, self-referential self—we do not see that the obligations that pay the debt forward are the least we can do for those whose hidden lives render gratitude prodigious yet insufficient. The dissipating ego is a snowflake that cannot survive a red-hot stove. It is here that we meet the ancient and often hidden teachers.

<sup>6</sup> Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arp Books, 2011), 87. Henceforth DTB. “At their core, Indigenous political movements contest the very foundation of the Canadian state in its current expression” (DTB, 16).