
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 8, number 1. Winter 2012

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Historical Time and Moral Universalism.

A Response to Thomas McCarthy's *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*

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In this important and well-informed study, Thomas McCarthy identifies the core problem of the current historical situation as consisting in the fact that moral-political advances are outpaced by capitalist globalization. In response to this, he argues that one should not just grab one horn of what he calls the dilemma of development, namely the moral-universal one, as many postcolonial and 'post-development' theorists have done (178). Although the goal must be to find new ways to tame globalization and its unleashing of economic, technological, and military powers by developing

"effective normative structures to contain and direct those powers onto paths of peace and justice" (149), we should not deprive ourselves of the concepts that can help us grasp the systemic forces of development operating 'behind our backs'. What I would like to ask McCarthy is whether he agrees that elaborating a "critical theory of global development" (184, 220) is not only necessary to understand this systemic side, but to rethink the historical connectedness across generations that Enlightenment ideas of progress, however problematic, also captured. If he agrees, then this critical theory and its attendant discourse ethics (14) will have to be conceived, from the beginning and not only in an applied sense or a secondary step, as aiming at intergenerational justice. In the space allotted here, I collect some elements from McCarthy's book that point in this direction.

"Development" is the name under which liberalism's universal-egalitarian ideals face historical reality. This reality includes different peoples and particular cultures, but also different generations, overlapping and non-overlapping. The refraction of universal moral ideals through the idea of progress relegated both non-Europeans and the non-contemporaneously living to a secondary status. The major part of the book under consideration is devoted to the oppression of the first of these two groups. To rethink development, as McCarthy argues so forcefully, means to understand its ongoing connection with racism and neoracism as well as with colonialism and neoimperialism. But he also notes, for instance, Kant's ambivalent justification of the 'use' of past generations in general as mere means to the development of the species' capacities (65). And today, McCarthy shows, neoracism can continue in part because present historical consciousness does not really acknowledge the past victims of racism and colonialism, forgetting slavery and the dispossession of native populations as an intrinsic, even constitutive part of modern, particularly US history (89, 113).

Oppression of non-Europeans and other generations are also at times, and not fortuitously, superimposed, as when a concern for the racial purity of lines of reproduction leads to strictures on miscegenation (51), or non-European peoples are cast into the role of children (180). This could justify paternalism while retaining universalism—“they” are in principle of equal moral worth and rationality, at least from a normative standpoint, but “not yet” ripe for self-rule (regarding the Millian version of this, see chapter 6, esp. 177; regarding Kant’s more conflicted position on the equal rationality of the races, see chapter 2, in particular 66). The conception demands that universalism takes not only a moral but also a cosmological form, presupposing one history, one common time, and one path to human perfection. The cosmological presupposition, to some extent made real by forcibly imposed modernization in what arrogant Eurocentrism then calls ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’ countries (183), permits the disdain for past peoples as backward, and other ‘races’ as lagging behind. Future generations are projected as the felicitous heirs of present developments, whose advanced species’ capacities, moral standing, and global-political organization will have justified oppression in the past and the present. The future is invoked merely as that which permits contemporaries to draw advance credit, for progress will redeem past oppression and overcome the dilemma of development. McCarthy calls this a logic of deferral (180), a logic that, as Walter Benjamin argued long ago, is inherent in Kantian regulative ideals that are not interrupted by another logic, by the urgency of demands that proscribe treating the past and the present as mere means to the future, a logic that should also grant future people more autonomy and difference.

In proposing to rethink developmental racism and imperialism, McCarthy thus does not neglect the entwinement of temporality and difference. To overcome racism is to overcome the progressivist schema and the idea of a common

and totalizing history, but hardly to do away with the historical time that both divides and connects generations. We have to rethink, and alter affective attitudes toward, the relation between time and otherness, globalization and multiple modernities (68), history and histories, universality and particularity. This is evident in McCarthy’s account of the need for a politics of memory and reparative justice: facing racism today means remembering, in more than facile gestures or colossal monuments, past racism. And we can also no longer cast the future into the role of happy heir of past violence. Rather, future people are more likely to inherit, not only increased knowledge and power, but also increased burdens that range from legacies of oppression that have not been ‘worked through’ to the reckless exploitation of resources that enabled development, from widening gaps between North and South to environmental degradation (228). Most commentators today, at least in the humanities and non-economic social sciences, no longer believe that the future will be enviable, with the obstinacy of world hunger and climate change only the most palpable indicators. The inevitably retrospective perspective of contemporaries in the ‘developed’ world lets ‘us’ see more clearly the costs associated with developing the ‘capacities of the species’, at a time when the luxury afforded by previous development makes its continuation appear, at least to some, less urgent.

McCarthy argues that a non-orthodox Habermasian discourse ethics, wedded to a “discourse theory of law and democracy” (14) and to a “critical theory of global development” (220), can help us retain both moral universalism and liberal developmentalism while avoiding the oppression of temporal and racial otherness. To see how this combination should be more explicitly conceived as a non-presentist theory of intergenerational justice, let us review some of the reasons why McCarthy turns to these theoretical tools. I will focus on discourse ethics and largely leave aside Habermas’ account of modernization in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, which

McCarthy uses to account for (a) the functionalist side of development (141) as well as for (b) the interconnected advances in cultural developments (what Habermas calls “the rationalization of the lifeworld”, 142), and for (c) how systemic imperatives tend to “colonize” and thus undermine the lifeworld at a certain point (152). In short, Habermas’ theory of modernization can help to adequately account for the “ambivalence of progress” (145) and draw up the balance sheets of modernizing development, tabulating its costs and benefits (147-165). These balance sheets, however, will not be constructed monologically, by the West alone, but rather dialogically as demanded by discourse ethics (68). Even if economic development was and continues to be imposed on the non-Western world, even if it tends to colonize and outpace the lifeworld, we cannot just abandon the concept of development now that the task is to politically, democratically and discursively, bend developmental processes toward poverty relief (184) and the concerns of future generations (228).

Discourse ethics’ dialogical rather than Kant’s monological account of universalism permits and even calls for “intercultural discussion and negotiation of the universals we have to bring into play in shaping our common human lives, ongoing contestation of their meaning in practice” (165). While McCarthy, as far as I can see, does not rule out that some procedural universals may be *given* with language use, and so be not constructed but developed in a process that Habermas viewed along progressive lines, McCarthy’s version of discursive reason accepts that its unity “is not simply given but also has to be achieved” and that “human reason is always already ‘impure,’ and the universal can only ever be actual as ‘concrete’” (186). Thus, discourse ethics promises to retain universalism without exclusions in its “impure ethics” or its “discourses of applications”. To conceive of ethics as ‘impure’ from the beginning is not only, shall we say, ontologically more adequate, but promises to

avoid Kant’s problem of a ‘pure’ universal morality unequally applied in its ‘impure’ particularization (44).

Here, McCarthy implicitly criticizes Habermas’ compartmentalization of universalism and particularism into two different discourses, one in which universal norms are justified by abstracting from particular differences, and a second, subordinate discourse in which they are applied to particular circumstances. McCarthy rightly argues that a look at the history of liberalism shows that universal norms were not just unequally *applied* to non-Europeans, denying them equal standing. Rather, liberal universalism was from the beginning combined with accounts of development so as to justify the exclusion and oppression of other peoples. In fact, ideals of autonomy and equality were forged in part in response to European expansion and in a context of colonial domination. Imbalances in power, and “a hermeneutic standpoint shaped by their [Europeans’] growing superiority of force” led to a situation in which “difference” came to be interpreted, not in terms of equality, but in “hierarchical and temporal terms” (179).

As a first pointer toward the intergenerational rethinking of the relation between time and difference, one may be tempted here to push McCarthy’s insights a little further by adding that it is not only the “combination of developmentalism with universalism” that is to be rethought once we recognize that this combination was forged “as a justification of empire from the beginning” (179). Rather, to be rethought is also the very idea of morally equal standing of autonomous individuals, with autonomy conceived as a force that is measurable in terms of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’, including force over children or those deemed backwards, thus force over one’s own past and the animal nature with which it remains connected. The history of racism suggests that moral standing cannot just be linked to equal autonomy, but is to be reconceived in terms of the physical and symbolic

vulnerability of a mortal body dependent on others for support and recognition.

The 'impurity' of universal ethics provides another pointer. Again with and beyond Habermas, McCarthy grounds the "unavoidable dialectic of the universal and the particular" (186) in "the entwinement of the right and the good" (164). Justificatory discourses do not operate in independence from inherited cultural values, which are needed to interpret what the interests are that may then be universalizable. A norm proposed in moral discourse to be in the equal interest of all affected and thus to be universal must be understood to be proposed from a particular, historically grown hermeneutic perspective and lifeworld, its "context of origin" that, as we saw, is interconnected with power relations and most often with a history of violent oppression. Furthermore, to test whether the norm can be accepted by all affected, discursive participants must anticipate, in their justificatory discourses, what consequences the adoption of the norm would have upon particular lifeworlds. Universal norms, interpreted in the light of cultural values, are thus to be refracted by way of a politics of memory and claims to reparative justice that may involve bending egalitarian norms in affirmative action policies and the like. The impurity of ethics demands that each generation is only for a time entrusted with the lifeworld and political institutions that it inherits and it is in turn to leave to the future. Its autonomy is temporary, and from the beginning includes the task to prepare the next generation of trustees for its turn with reshaping traditions and institutions from a position of autonomy.

The future-oriented concern also follows from the fact that even in the economic sphere development is neither self-enclosed nor automatic, but feeds off other spheres, often with significant costs. Once progress, on economic, moral-political, and environmental terms, can no longer be assumed, trustee generations must also consider the balance sheet of

developmental effects upon succeeding generations. The recognition that the Western model of development cannot be replicated because it was based on oppression and exploitation of others also has a future-oriented dimension, for development has to become, as the buzzword has it, sustainable: "How can we achieve a more equitable access to natural resources at present without short-changing future generations?" (228). Hence, the critical theory of development has to replace the "perfection of species' capacities" as a developmental goal with "what participants judge to be in the best interests of everyone affected by those changes, including those not yet born who will have to live with the consequences of present decisions" (162). With good justification, McCarthy wishes to understand discourse ethics as a moral theory that grants equal moral standing to future people and that demands that present participants connect the past with the future. To remember the past violence of development is required to prevent its blind imposition on non-Westerners and on future people.

Many critics doubt that discourse ethics is well placed to include the concerns of non-present people, past and future, precisely because it demands present participation of autonomous individuals. One attempt at a solution lies in accepting that only the voices of presently living participants count, but that these voices may well include the concerns of past and future people. This appears to be the route taken by McCarthy on the vexed issue of dead victims of 'development', from slavery to genocide. For here he follows Pablo de Greiff in suggesting that the obligation to remember the victims of development is grounded not in the posthumous interest of the dead themselves, whose independent moral standing is taken to be dubious, but in the interests of the victims' present descendants, of whom we cannot reasonably expect that they conveniently forget what was done to their forebears (105). While one may doubt that the absence of descendants would cancel the duty to

remember, it is even more apparent that this solution alone will not do in the case of future people. Rather than depending upon the good will of the living, present discourse participants should be constrained by the universalizability principle itself to consider the interests of future people. Considering their interests, by extending the 'all-affected' principle as McCarthy suggests (162), however, seems to require that we virtualize consent to norms and policies on behalf of future people. This is a solution that Habermas, as far as I can see, has increasingly adopted, despite his earlier criticism of Rawls for not demanding actual discourses among affected parties. Virtualizing consent, however, has led to the charge that discourse ethics has become indistinguishable from a hypothetical contract view, such as Scanlon's.

One may wonder, by contrast, whether McCarthy's twin "dialectic of progress" and "dialectic of the right and the good" do not suggest another, complementary way in which moral discourses can connect the past and the present. The back and forth between universalization and particularization, between justification and application, should from the beginning be understood to permit the adoption of universal norms only in view of what future people not only may be able to re-affirm, but must in fact re-consider from a position of autonomy that it is the duty of present institutions to safeguard and enable. The dialectic of the right and the good entails generational turn taking with traditions and institutions, as each generation needs to re-affirm—and that means, filter through—its heritage and re-justify—or not—norms purported to be in the equal interest of all (103). Each generation is first of all to understand itself as the recipient of a gift of prior generations, a gift whose acceptance, no matter how involuntary, comes with the duty to compensate for the costs its production and transfer incurred. It is these costs, here principally those of neoracism

and neoimperialism, that are so unequally distributed in the present.

The duty of compensation, then, whether or not it takes the form of reparations, is grounded both in the past and the future, at that turning point in the present where time and otherness—other times and other cohabitants of the earth—intersect so as to unsettle the idea of a present time that simply coincides with itself, thereby lending itself to one linear development for all. There is an empirical side to this argument in favour of the Janus face of historical responsibility: as McCarthy shows, the effects of past oppression reach into the present and, without compensatory action, make the prospects of greater future autonomy for its victims and their descendants less hopeful than they would otherwise be. While the causes of the duty may be primarily historical as well as ongoing and contemporary, we find its beneficiaries first of all in the present and the future. But there is also a less empirical and more conceptual point: if 'we' the presently living or the presently autonomous see ourselves as taking turns with institutions and the lifeworld, our moral regard must be both to what we inherited and how we are to leave it to the next turn-takers. The duty of compensation thus originates both with the acceptance of violently costly benefits and the enabling of future autonomy, the task to leave an increasingly reflective lifeworld.

As intergenerational justice involves bringing up a next generation capable of executing its responsibilities, one can only agree with McCarthy's perhaps most important forward-looking recommendation, namely, the improvement of education about history (113) and public historical consciousness more generally (89), not only in the US but in the 'developed' world at large.