

# Time Creators and Time Creatures in the Ethics of World Politics

Written by Kimberly Hutchings

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KIMBERLY HUTCHINGS, JUL 24 2016

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### Truth as the Father of Time

Rousseau's jibe, that Hobbes showed us not man but Englishmen in a state of nature, makes a profound and perennially relevant point about the nature of rationalist theorising about ethics and politics. Specifically here my concern is with ethical theorists who believe that answers to ethical questions about world politics can be arrived at through the exercise of impartial reason at the level of ideal theory, often using thought experiments as a way of clarifying and resolving moral dilemmas about war or global justice (see Hutchings 2010: 28-53 for an overview of rationalist ethical theories; Simmons 2010 for a discussion of the ideal / non-ideal theory distinction). Thought experiments construct scenarios in order to test out moral intuitions, and may range from Singer's famous use of the example of the passing adult's obligation to save a child from drowning in order to demonstrate the moral obligations of the globally affluent towards the starving (Singer 1972) to increasingly fantastical articulations of the 'trolley problem' to tease out circumstances in which killing the innocent may be justified. This kind of moral reasoning is particularly characteristic of certain trends in cosmopolitan moral theory based on deontological, consequentialist or contractualist assumptions, especially recent developments in the ethics of war (see McMahan 2009; Fabre 2012).

As critics of ideal theory have persistently pointed out, the principles, actors and situations that make up the worlds of thought experiments tend to reflect and incorporate assumptions that are specific to the time and place of the theorist, whether the theorist is conscious of this or not (Mills 2005; Miller 2008). In what follows I suggest that one such set of assumptions that remains in place, and continues to do a lot of work in the articulation and reception of rationalist international ethical and political theory, is a set of assumptions about the temporality of world politics. The ways in which traditions of moral thought are mobilised in ethical rationalism is indifferent to historical context. But this very indifference is premised on assumptions about time and the role of the theorist in relation to it that are highly historically specific. They are assumptions that follow from the subsumption of moral theory under an epistemic, Baconian model of science (Hutchings 2008: 32-34). On this account, truth (science) has priority over time (nature) and provides the key to controlling and making time (second nature). Within this worldview, as I have explained elsewhere, the temporality of the ethical and political present (within the possible worlds of ethical argumentation and thought experiment) is a temporality of creative action in which creative time-making (*Kairos*) imposes itself on natural, chronological time (*Chronos*). In keeping with Baconian rationalism, agents within the simplified worlds of ethical theory, who are depicted as making decisions about what it would be right to do in particular situations (e.g. when faced with choices between killing and letting die in the contest of war) are, *insofar as they enact true principles*, time-makers. This temporal positioning is confirmed by the fact that the imagined situations in which agents in these scenarios are caught, necessitate that the capacity to master time is not universally shared. Shadowy 'other' actors accompany the moral agents in the spotlight of the possible world. Without these other actors, there is

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no situation, there are no moral dilemmas and questions.

The focus in scenarios imagined by ethical theorists is on the question of what would be right in certain situations for moral agents to do, but in order for this question to be raised moral agents require the presence of those who are not competent moral agents in the fullest sense. They are the mistaken, the wicked, the ignorant and the incapable. Without them, no moral dilemmas would arise. The temporality of the simplified world of ethical thought experiments, therefore, is double and paradoxical, it is one in which time creators and time creatures share and do not share the same temporality of action, the (hypothetical) present. This unevenness is underlined by the abstracted practices and institutions that also shape the situation, and that reflect a skew towards the perspective of those moral agents for whom certain questions are particularly relevant. Questions about the criteria for intervention, about who should be killable and who should not, about whether there is an obligation to give aid, to reform global governance, or to redistribute wealth. Such questions presuppose asymmetrical power relations within the simplified world and are addressed to the strong, who are strong in two interrelated senses: first in the sense that they are full moral agents; second, in the sense that they occupy positions of power.

The scenarios constructed by ethical theorists do their work at the level of ideal theory through the identification of the theorist (truth teller) and their audience with idealised moral agency. The purpose of the exercise is to illuminate what should be done in a context in which what ought to be done can be done. This means that the theorist and audience see their situation from the perspective of the time-makers. This identification is cemented through the examples and analogies used to bring the argument home. Where these illustrations are fictional, they typically place the moral agent in a relation in which moral hierarchy and asymmetrical power are obvious: adults and children; perpetrators and victims; punishers and criminals. Where these illustrations are historical, they typically draw on events specific to histories and experiences that will be familiar to theorist and audience. The reason, I suggest, why these kinds of illustrations are so important for rationalist moral and political theory is that they make clear the homology between the fictional temporality of the possible world of thought experimentation and unquestioned assumptions about the temporality of actual world politics, and thus enable theorist and audience to recognise themselves within the imagined scenarios through which they develop their arguments. These unquestioned assumptions not only presume a world in which the time of action is unevenly distributed, but map this uneven distribution so as to identify the truth that generates time with the time and place of the theorist and audience. Possible worlds incorporate precisely the assumptions of simultaneous equality and hierarchy that characterise predominant narratives of world politics and economics in the post-Cold War period. Moreover, they reproduce the same mapping of strength and weakness, goodness and badness and the same recipe for how weakness and badness may be addressed through the good offices of the strong and the good, the time makers amongst us. In effect, the possible world accomplishes for moral rationalism, what philosophical history accomplishes for historicism; it grants a universal and unifying significance to the time making powers of western modernity for the world as a whole.

The implications of the reproduction of the western moral imaginary for the practice of theory are evident in Singer's previously cited argument for the moral requirement on individuals to give aid to famine victims. In order to make his point, Singer makes an analogy between the obligation for the affluent to give aid in a specified situation of famine in which certain conditions are assumed, and the obligation of an adult passing by to save a child from drowning in a puddle. Singer's adult/ child analogy works powerfully to dramatise his point about the nature of the obligation of affluent westerners to aid victims of famine. But it does so by explicitly characterising the relation between the affluent west and the victim other in terms of a protective relation between the mature adult and the immature child. Singer's argument could not be addressed to the victim/ child, because the latter is a subject position defined through incapacity, an incapacity that, by implication, is spiritual as well as material. What is being set up is not just a hierarchical way of seeing the world, but also the exclusion of victim/ child from the moral conversation, because in addition to being incapable of action, the victim/ child does not know anything morally or empirically valuable. This endows the ethical theorist and the addressees of his arguments with a position of ethical privilege, one that empowers both theorist and audience, within the moral imaginary of the simplified world, to act unilaterally because of their grasp of moral and empirical truth. Moral reasoning, on this account, becomes a profoundly hierarchical and exclusive business, even while it aims to forward universal principles of moral equality. The moral equality of theorist, audience and hypothetical moral agents in the possible world is inseparable from a distinction between those who grasp moral equality as a truth and those that do not.

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To suggest that this is corrupting of the ambitions of rationalist cosmopolitan arguments may sound hyperbolic, but I do not think it overstates the case. It is corrupting because of its implicit identification of an audience capable of learning with those who already share the same world, and because of the limitations that it places on what can be learnt. And also because of the dispositional relations it sets up between moral theorists and those on behalf of whom they claim to speak – the shadowy, less than fully competent agents, who are stuck in time and not, by definition, going to learn from their role in the moral theorists' thought experiments. The explicit purpose of such arguments is to provide critical standards for thought, yet scenarios are constructed in such a way that no fundamental shifting of established ways of thinking about the ethics of world politics is possible. Thus one may argue over the principles or even the permissibility of aid, development, resistant violence or humanitarian intervention, but always within the terms of moral and empirical reference points that are fused within a particular moral imaginary. Those terms keep meaningful conversation to a restricted group of participants – perhaps best captured by the term 'the beneficent powerful'. To engage with the moral imaginaries of the vulnerable, the immature, the wicked, or the incapable would be to 'go back' to times that have been transcended by truth. Each time cosmopolitan ethical theorists replay their account of moral agency situated in the context of its shadowy others (perpetrators and victims), the moral superiority and historical advantage of the theorist and of their audience is reaffirmed.

The co-existence of equality and inequality in the worlds of moral rationalism is rendered comprehensible by being embedded in a temporal imaginary specific to Baconian assumptions about the relation between truth and time. Within this imaginary, the dispositional relation between the moral theorist and those on behalf of whom she speaks most commonly manifests itself in one of three modalities: *protective*; *educative* and *punitive*. Moral rationalists use their simplified worlds to enable identification between theorist, addressee and idealised moral agency. This means that they identify with the moral position, choices and dilemmas of the protector, the teacher and the law enforcer. This way of approaching ethical questions is epistemic and technocratic, for rationalist moral theorists the holder of moral truth within the possible world is beyond the reach of affect and power, and able to be effective in implementing the requirements of truth. In this respect, although theorists and their addressees make mistakes, these mistakes are of a particular kind, they do not disturb the fundamental subject position of the truth teller and truth seeker. Of course, theorists know that they can get things wrong – as is evident from ongoing disputes between different rationalist positions – but they can never be fundamentally wrong in the world-shifting way that time creatures are wrong. At the same time as having a conversation between themselves, therefore, a hierarchical relation with others is being reproduced. In this respect, the moral sensibilities and sensitivities cultivated in the hypothetical worlds of moral rationalism are those of authority derived from superiority.

## Truth as the Daughter of Time

It might be argued that the corruption I identify follows not from the assumptions of moral rationalism but from the illicit smuggling in of elements of western bias into imagined worlds, for instance through the analogy between developed world and adult. If this is the case, then it implies that a moral technocracy that can demonstrate to all what ought to be done through access to the realm of truth (beyond time) is a viable possibility. But unless the actual world has already achieved moral perfection from the point of view of all (in which case the moral technocracy would be redundant) then this would still leave the hierarchy between time creators and time creatures, and the reproduction of that world in place. Although it undoubtedly provides a way of ensuring rigorous clarification of what the truth is claimed to be, any normative theory modelled on Baconian assumptions elevates those that grasp the truth over those that don't. When it comes to normative theories about world politics it is hard to see how any particular band of moral technocrats can avoid reproducing the hierarchies that have enabled the leisure and provided the tools to exercise that technocracy in the first place. If we are to counter this tendency, then the chances are higher if rather than seeking to inhabit an imaginary that is completely out of this world, we replace Bacon's vision of truth as the masculine progenitor of time with the alternative conceit of a feminised truth, the daughter of time, and use this to multiply the worldly imaginaries that are expressed in our hypothetical worlds.

If moral truth is the daughter of time rather than its father, then there are no timeless ethical truths that have the capacity to make time, and the temporal parameters of judgment have to become an explicit focus of attention for international ethical and political theory. The coincidence of moral superiority and historical advantage that is rationalised in the possible worlds of moral rationalism (and the developmental philosophies of history of liberalism

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and Marxism) relies on accounts of world political temporality as singular, unevenly progressive and led by the West. If this temporal framing is put into question, then so is the mutual reinforcement between claims to moral superiority and historical privilege, and therefore between moral superiority and particular ways of organising human relations: interpersonally, socially, economically and politically. If one is interested in doing international ethical and political theory in a way that does not take the modernist moral/ historical link for granted, then provincialising work is necessary. This is essentially work of *disorientation* and *reorientation* as part of the construction of moral imaginaries less hidebound by the assumptions that structure the possible worlds of rationalism. So, how is this to be done? And what are the implications in terms of the concerns of international ethical and political theory?

First of all, the moral theorist has to recognise and acknowledge the moral imaginary that he or she takes for granted. Moral rationalism encourages the equation of a moral imaginary with a set of epistemic premises, but in practice no moral imaginary is confined to articulable ethical principles and values, it also includes assumptions about situations, about protagonists, about empirical facts, about lived experience and about the space and time of moral engagement. All of this, I suggest, when trying to think ethically about *world* politics is underwritten and made intelligible by a reading of world political time, a set of assumptions about the nature and meaning of the world political present in relation to past and future, and the place of one's theoretical voice within that narrative. The process of disorientation I am recommending requires the rationalist moral theorist to leave the comfort zone of this identification between moral superiority and their own particular place and time and to embrace an 'out of jointness' in which their own 'backwardness' or 'wickedness' could be possible. This may sound like a reintroduction of some kind of transcendental move beyond time, but this would only be the case if the temporality of ethical judgment prevalent within the western academy is the only possible temporality, and if truth is the daughter not the father of time then that is something that could not self-evidently be the case. In fact, we *know* it is not the case, in the banal sense that the moral superiority/ historical advantage story has not always framed ethical and political thinking and has been, and continues to be, consistently contested from inside and outside the political communities that have been its key proselytisers. The only way to suspend dependence on a particular reading of the present is to open up one's moral imaginary to other orientations. Very often, historically, such opening up has been violently enforced rather than willingly embraced. Nevertheless, for most of the populations that occupy the shadowy 'other' positions in the possible worlds of moral rationalism, engagement between different moral imaginaries and different temporal orderings is commonplace. Borrowing Chakrabarty's terminology, I have suggested elsewhere that international ethical and political theorists need to cultivate a heterotemporal orientation towards ethical judgment (Chakrabarty 2000; Hutchings 2011).

A heterotemporal orientation to cosmopolitanism decentres the position of the ethical theorist by questioning the assumption of a fusion between his or her particular present and 'the' present of world politics. It raises the question as to why, for example, humanitarian intervention or the 'Responsibility to Protect' should be taken as a sign of the distinctiveness of the world-political present. For whom, and from whose perspective is this a novel development? Does it mark a normative difference in the conduct of world politics or simply confirm a set of longstanding patterns? To raise the question of novelty is to disturb the kinds of subjective certainty, of 'at homeness' in thought, that render phenomena such as humanitarian intervention straightforwardly timely. In this respect, a heterotemporal orientation makes the work of the theorist much harder, since it requires the painful, political effort of cross-temporal engagement without the short cuts enabled by the taken for granted fusion of his or her particular present with the end of history.

If humanitarian intervention is identified with the potential globalisation of justice, then a heterotemporal orientation would suggest that what is needed is to begin by acknowledging and examining political temporalities of violation, in order to understand the meanings of injustice in the present. This would enable judgment of the likely effects of the institutionalisation of particular normative priorities in the principles and practices of international humanitarianism. But it would also open up the question of what kinds of violation matter and why, and offer a different route to the establishment of international hierarchies of outrage than that reflected in the moral priorities of existing international human rights regimes. Within predominant contemporary diagnoses of, and prescriptions for, world politics the problem is not that the co-existence of a plurality of orientations goes unrecognised, so much as that the meaning of this plurality is always already homogenised by reference to the authoritative space/time of western modernity. It is the subjective certainty of this orientation that not only grounds the theorist's judgment but also enables it to make a

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difference in practice, through timely prescription and through example. Instead of being the one who already knows the time, the heterotemporally oriented theorist is fundamentally uncertain of his own punctuality (see Thaler 2014 for an attempt to complicate temporal assumptions in just war theory). The extent to which his interventions are or are not timely will depend on the moral/temporal certainties and uncertainties (orientations) of his interlocutors. To engage with alternative temporal framings for judgment is well within the limits of logical possibility, but to take seriously a challenge to one's investment in a narrative of truth and progress that cannot live with provincialisation, is profoundly disturbing for those of us educated in rationalist traditions of moral theorising. It is, however, the only way to shift the ground of ethical debate about world politics away from an agenda that is incapable of seriously questioning its own timeliness.

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