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## Presentism the Magnifier

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# PRESENTISM THE MAGNIFIER

For “Thinking and Acting Ecologically”  
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Enter the single mother, after many years of trying and with help from distant family, she is a new immigrant from Nairobi. Short on income from her low wage job as a maid in a local business hotel, she rushes to the supermarket between work and picking up her children at state-sponsored afterschool care. Emptying change in her hand at the checkout counter, she says to the clerk, “I just got to make a living. Don’t have time to think about anything else.” She has two children to feed that night.

Enter the executive of a major oil company charged with public relations. His special mission inside the corporation is to seed misinformation about climate change by managing research funding to projects and seemingly autonomous think tanks that promise to sow doubt about climate change. He knows this goes against science, but he doesn’t care. As a team player in his corporation, he has the next quarterly return to consider. Some people, such as Donald Brown, hold that his person is actively responsible for a crime against humanity (Brown 2013). In my view, he could be in the manner that Adolf Eichmann was responsible for the genocide against Jews in National Socialist Germany, namely, through a banal evil made possible in contemporary transnational corporate capitalism (Arendt 2006).

These are our two main characters, who might actually cross paths in a hotel some time, the executive passing through the airport hotel for the night on an

unexpected layover caused by bad weather and union regulations on hours worked by flight crews, and the single mother cleaning up after him the next morning, throwing his fast food wrappers into her portable garbage bin and cleaning off his urine splashed around the rim of the toilet.

Let us also meet a third character. She is the environmentalist who happened also to be on the held-over flight but who slept in the airport in an uncomfortable chair and crossed the single mother on the mother's way from the subway to the airport hotel when the single mother walked through the terminal by the place the conservationist was sleeping –the one unconscious, the other pre-occupied, never a thought to each other. The environmentalist seeks funding for her recycling campaign and is going to meet with her parliamentarian. She wants to place recycling bins on every corner in a ten by ten block shopping section of her downtown. She wants them to be bright green and covered in daisies. She thinks it will send an important message about her city to the world: Don't let all your packaging waste go inside a landfill!

There are clear, moral differences between these three characters. The executive appears to be committing a crime against humanity. He really works in the vicinity of evil. The single mother is coping with complex issues of class, many of which involve injustice that fall on her: the historical injustice of colonialism which lies behind such a complicated economic situation in her home country and which led to her emigration, the injustice of sexism which underlies why she did not have a chance to go to university, and the injustices of class, xenophobia and racism in her new nation which lead some people to clean up other people's urine out of economic necessity and other people to not think twice about having someone else clean up their urine out of economic necessity. The single mother is also involved in upholding her

duties to her children; indeed that is her driving motive. Caught by injustices, yet trying single-mindedly to realize her most important duties to her children: it is not hard to admire her. Finally, the environmentalist –who, I should add, is pursuing her cause solely as a volunteer- seems to be benefitting society, though the benefit is mainly symbolic, perhaps just cosmetic. She might not elicit as much admiration as the single mother, but she does present as a well-meaning person.

Yet despite the moral differences between these three people, all do share one moral thing: they all share a vice.

## Presentism

Presentism is a species of bias, itself a species of the vice of injustice. The single mother and the executive share it *out of injustice*, and the environmentalist has it *due to poor calculation*. This “out of” –this source of the vice- is important. It indicates a flawed *goal* to the pattern of one’s life, an omission or a clear contravention of the goal of being fair to future generations. The single mother is unjust *from negligence* of future generations (an omission) whereas the executive is unjust *from deliberate selfishness* toward future generations (a contravention). However, the environmentalist is unjust *despite her better intentions* and so does not act with a flawed *goal* regarding future generations. Her problem resides at the level of the *means* she adopts to pursue her just end.

These three characters each display presentism of a sort. When I think of the single mother, I think that her name is “Mercy,” the first name of an actual Kenyan advocate for the rights of slum girls in Nairobi who had been raped and so cast out

into the street due to dishonor. Noting that Mercy displays presentism leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, so much accumulated, historical injustice does she suffer and so many of the contradictions that make up contemporary planetary capitalism does she carry as a burden. It would seem yet another contradiction and an injustice to place vice on her shoulders. But I am not asking here whether her vice might be *excusable*, nor whether it makes sense to speak of “excusable vices.” Bitter as it is, it does seem possible for Mercy to have mercy on the future, just as she might wish people to have mercy on her (and the real Mercy wishing people would have mercy on her girls). Hers is not one thought too many, as Bernard Williams used to poke at utilitarianism, but one thought too few, although I can imagine her mind is so crowded with survival details and fatigue as to make any extra thought seem virtuous. Yet Mercy could say at the check-out counter, “It is hard these days; I do not feel it is fair that I have to carry History on my back; and I worry that people in the future will have to pay for all that we in our society are doing.” She would not have one thought too many in saying this. She would be closer to freedom herself, closer to stepping outside the vicious contradictions that structure contemporary capitalism with its post-colonial geography and expanding underclass. She would see how she is well nigh pressured to become an upper class to the future as itself the most massive and vulnerable underclass of contemporary planetary capitalism. Her presentism, while perhaps excusable as a vice of human limitation, *attests* to the divisive formation of atomized individuals in contemporary capitalism, the way people feel pressured or find themselves trained and behaviorally corralled to become selfish individuals rather than common humans connected through equality and justice to humans everywhere, now, in the past, and in the future, and to our companion forms of life –Earth’s multiform species- who also do

not deserve to be abused by humankind. So Mercy's attitudes are presentist, but not because she *wants* to favor her own over future generations, but because she ends up *neglecting* to think about them. I would guess that *presentism of neglect* is the most common form of presentism in our world today. What do you think?

When I think of the executive, the name that comes to mind is "Dick," after Dick Cheney, probably the most diabolically bad person of the U.S. Federal Government in recent years. And indeed Dick, the executive, is a major, world-class dick. He intentionally doesn't care at all what happens to anyone who does not directly affect his corporation's profit margin, outside the circle, one imagines, of his family, friends, and favorite American football team (he has to suffer this British thing called "football" when visiting the U.K.). It does not seem hard to see the vice in this Dick. When working on his climate change misinformation campaign, he is quite aware of the risks the planet's descendants face. There is no negligence here, because he is not *failing* to care about others. Rather, he doesn't want to care about others. This is intentional bias, not unintentional bias as in the case of Mercy. He does not fail to have a thought about the wellbeing of future generations; he refuses to acknowledge any legitimate claims they might have on him and on his company, just as Adolf Eichmann did with the Jews he sent to the gas chambers and firing squads after extorting their wealth. Acknowledging the common humanity Dick shares with any future generations would only get in the way of business. This *presentism of conscious selfishness* is not as uncommon as one would hope. In any place where the accepted *ethos* is intentional selfishness, it is likely to be found, simply because one cannot be consistently selfish and reject presentism in theory or in practice.

What about the environmentalist? I imagine her named “Heidi” after Heidi Klum of *Project Runway*. She thinks that environmentalism is a matter of taste, of showing people a more attractive way of life that can intersect with their shopping preferences. She is patriarchally gendered and a typical, female capitalist subject of the upper middle class. Both she and Mercy bear sexism in different forms, Mercy suffering for it, and Heidi –who happens to be pretty by racist, European consumer standards- alternately benefiting and being reduced by it in different ways. Heidi is also like Dick in that she accepts the logic of the selfish market ungrudgingly. No world-weariness affects her when she imagines the daisies painted on her recycling bins. Still, she is unlike both Mercy and Dick in that she does think about future generations –intentionally, in fact. There is neither neglect nor conscious selfishness to her cast of mind, no problem of *ends* when it comes to future generations. The problem is one of means. Due to the extent to which she has internalized contemporary planetary capitalism in her sense of normal agency and due to fanciful thinking (itself part of what she has internalized of contemporary market utopianism), she has calculated poorly about what will lead to meeting the legitimate claims of future generations out of common humanity. Affecting market preferences around consumer waste in a shopping district, effectively attracting people to shop *more* with the lure of illegitimately soothed consciences, neglecting to become informed about *industrial* waste, not organizing into collective action aimed at change in the laws of waste nationally, not pushing collectively for binding international treaties on the laws of planetary waste: this daisy-painted bundle of miscalculation will not make a difference when it comes to tackling planetary overshoot of Earth’s nine boundaries by our planetary economy (Rockström et al. 2009). Heidi’s bias is not one in morals but one

in practical intelligence; accordingly it is unintentional. It is *presentism by poor calculation*. How many of us environmentalists are presentists by poor calculation? How many of us *cannot* but be presentists by poor calculation outside of anything besides focused, collective action to change the underlying norms of our societies (Vogel 2012, Bendik-Keymer, forthcoming)? Either activist or presentist –that seems to be the question.

*Presentism of neglect, presentism of conscious selfishness, presentism by poor calculation.*

There are undoubtedly other kinds of presentism, for instance any presentism that, out of overly sophisticated reasoning, does not think we are in a metaphysical position to collectively address justice to future generations without ourselves becoming immoral. This would be *presentism by sophistry* –something of which theoreticians can be guilty, in particular Derek Parfit. But in a conference on environmental activism, do I really need to speak to the vice of academic philosophers, namely, to think that competition in sophisticated argument is a mark of seeking wisdom? I will not look at metaphysical distinctions the way a child looks at candy. In any case, tonight, I defer debate to Stephen Gardiner, who rightly marks that Parfit’s sophistry is a cloud of moral corruption, although he certainly doesn’t mean it to be (Gardiner 2011).

Can we think of other kinds of presentism? What matters to me here is to demarcate the category of bias; that is all. **I think we need a clear, public word for our world’s major vice.** The presentist fails to, or simply doesn’t, adequately consider the legitimate moral demands of future generations, focusing disproportionately on her



or his own generation. *Presentism is bias against future generations in favor of the present one.*

Hence the expression.<sup>1</sup>

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There are six parts to this definition:

(1) *Future generations.* Stephen Gardiner (2011) saw that when considering the moral problem of future generations, a moral category is needed, not a biological one. We are born in a biological continuum where any category of a generation is arbitrary, such that the *moral* distinction between a group of people born in 1960 and a group of people born in 1985 is also arbitrary. Accordingly, Gardiner worked out a non-morally arbitrary concept of generations. Future generations are those humans who will be in a non-reciprocal relation to us. We can affect them without them having any ability to affect us. This excludes our grandchildren, who can affect us. I call future generations *posterity beyond our grandchildren.*

(2) *The present generation.* The present generation is the group of humans who can affect each other. So, from the moral point of view, our grandchildren are in the present generation with us.

(3) *Legitimate moral demands.* Every generation is tasked with doing the best it can out of and for common humanity. It can only grasp the needs of common humanity to the best of its knowledge and would be negligent if it did not act on the best of its knowledge. Moreover, it must assume that new generations of humans will be born as part of the common human life cycle and that each new generation of humans will have common human needs, subject to change only when we actually have reasons to articulate a change in our agency. Since we must assume future generations of humans with common human needs, we must extend common humanity to them, holding open a space within our society for not undermining future society's ability to meet those needs as well as preparing future society as best we can to meet those needs. Finally *–pace* Parfit- if future persons would object to our changing their fate by *improving* our society now in its standards of common humanity, they would be guilty of moral corruption, of opposing self-interestedly the improvement of standards of common humanity.

(4) *Adequate consideration.* If the moral demands of future generations are the most difficult to justify, their adequate consideration is the most difficult to explain. I would love to see phenomenologists take explanation up in full. Adequate consideration is the inverse of much of contemporary life. We neglect, contravene, or miscalculate – whereas it does not. Typography is deserved here, contemporary life described in negative. Adequate consideration is any consideration of the legitimate moral demands of future generations that in no way obscures the *precision* or *authority* of those demands. For instance, adequate consideration concerned with precision is most useful for explaining Heide's presentism of poor calculation. She is not precise about what moral demands require. Meanwhile, consideration concerned with authority helps explain Dick's presentism. Selfish to the bone, he eschews the authority of common humanity.

(5) *Failure (of adequate consideration).* Failure of adequate consideration has its own concerns, a point made clear by Mercy. Certainly, she doesn't consider the moral demands of future generations with either precision or recognition of their authority, but one can imagine her being open to doing so; she is not consciously selfish as Dick is. Rather, her presentism of neglect suggests a failure that, in its wake, leads to inadequate consideration. In other work (Bendik-Keymer 2012), I have examined what I call the *context* of virtue to explore just this kind of case: the case of someone whose life displays a vice although her intentions are roughly good. Mercy *fails* to adequately consider the legitimate moral demands of future generations due to a complex nest of reasons that in many cases reside in her socio-economic context. These, at least, would be grounds –if there are any- for excusing her of her presentism. We would of course examine the failure of Heidi to calculate adequately as well as the failure of Dick to be anything but a dick, but Heidi has the power of an upper middle class woman to seek education, and Dick knows better.

Finally, (6) *Disproportionate focus.* There will be complicated issues of balancing the needs of the present generation against the legitimate moral demands of the future generations. In addressing such balancing, even trade-offs, the focus on the moral demands of the generations must not be disproportionate. In other words, only a moral reason that trumps the legitimate *prima facie* demands of one or the other generation provides a reason to focus more on one than the other. Then, at that point, what is a legitimate moral demand of a generation reshapes. Proportion is simply the correlate of legitimacy. If we knew that a geological shift is highly likely to affect people beginning a thousand years from now and could take action to prepare them for this, then they would deserve some more focus around certain issues than we do ourselves; they might then legitimately demand that we make some sacrifices.

To repeat, then, presentism is bias against future generations in favor of the present one. The presentist fails to, or simply doesn't, adequately consider the legitimate moral demands of future generations, focusing disproportionately on her or his own generation.

# The magnifier

Presentism is the most morally significant bias in the world today, although it is as generally unseen as racism, sexism or homophobia once were. There are two main reasons why presentism is the most significant bias: (1) whatever harm presentism produces becomes greater and greater, snowballing from generation to generation; (2) presentism increases the vulnerability of classes of people already made vulnerable by bias. Both reasons expose what I call *magnifier* considerations. Allow me to briefly explain my reasoning behind each.

First, as Gardiner (2011) has so well analyzed, some of the most obvious effects of presentism enable our polluting the planet so that increasingly many future generations will suffer from our actions now and increasingly severely. The case of climate pollution and change are the case in point. Our presentism now contributes substantially to not taking climate change as the overriding practical problem of our age. We are no longer ignorant of climate change. We collectively have *failed* –for many reasons to be sure- to adequately consider future generations when it comes to our fossil fuel and forest use. The result is a mounting atmospheric carbon dioxide count. As this and related counts rise, we do three things. First, we increase the risk of bequeathing a more harmful climate to future fellow humans. Second, we increase the potential harmfulness of the climate by increasingly destabilizing it. Third, we extend the time it will take the Earth to cycle out greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and stabilize the planet in a less harmful climate. Our presentism now

magnifies risk, harmfulness, and the duration of both. As it does, more and more humans in the future are, as Heidi Klum might say, *thrown under the bus*, to say nothing of our companions on Earth, the multiform species of Holocene life. Racism now affects both the racists and the targeted races, as well as some generations after the last racist has changed his ways. But presentism now affects people all over the planet for on the order of 10,000 years into the future –a staggering duration that exceeds the imagination. I won't say more about this here, since Gardiner has analyzed the issue so well.

Second, presentism magnifies the effects of many other “isms” –that is, of many other biases exposing humans to disproportionate and illegitimate vulnerability within society's power. This second magnifier has not been well explored, to my knowledge. I suppose it the more original claim in this talk. My assumption is this: in a future where ecological resources are reduced, those classes of people who are already discriminated against, those toward whom the powerful are already biased –these fellow human beings are more likely to find even *less* available to them than they would without the effects of presentism. In other words, I am assuming that vulnerable people whose vulnerability is largely due to bias are likely to be even *more* vulnerable due to presentism. In such a case, the effects of presentism would magnify the effects of the pre-existing biases.

Think about Mercy in 75 years. At present rates of carbon dioxide emissions, the Earth is highly likely to encounter fairly severe climate destabilization as this century nears its end (I.P.C.C. 2013). This will plausibly lead to increased economic and political instability and to scarcer resources (the case of desertification in the Sudan looms large here for many futurists). In addition, although there have been

great strides in decolonization and in feminism in the last seventy five years, it is quite unclear whether the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism that lay behind Mercy's post-colonial experience will have disappeared. Looking just at sexism alone, although we can reasonably hope for great strides across the century, the deeply buried nature of sexism and the way its effects ripple across generations make it unlikely, I think, that sexism will not be a consideration for someone like Mercy. The point, speculation aside, is this: *if* there is any sexism or racism or classism or xenophobia or neo-colonialism when Mercy attempts to make her move to the U.K. to work in 2087, the volatilized climate will only make it more likely that she will be passed over, she who already would have biases against her that would lead powerful classes of people to pass her over. And there is also this: if the *legacy* of sexism, racism, and colonialism has not been repaired by 2087, fully repaired, then Mercy will start with a global disadvantage relative to those who have benefited from bias, and this disadvantage will intersect with the increasing volatility of the climate due to our and our parents' presentism, magnifying her vulnerability. In this way, then, presentism will be a magnifier.

So presentism is really, really serious. It magnifies the severity and duration of risk and harm across generation to generation into the far, far future. It also magnifies the vulnerabilities of people already subject to widespread and often multiple biases. There is a good case to be made that presentism is actually the most severe form of bias in the world today, even worse than sexism, racism, and classism.

Should we feel damned by this? I do not have time tonight to address the question I left hanging with Mercy, the question of when presentism is *excusable*, although still a vice. There is one disanalogy between presentism and the isms against

people before our very eyes –racism, sexism, classism. In the case of each of the isms of those before our very eyes, our flaw is a flaw of the *sentiment* of humanity. We are not being properly empathic, where empathy should allow us to see that we are in the grip of a prejudice: each human before our eyes is equally human. However, in the case of presentism, our sentiment of humanity does not fail, but rather our habit of conceptualizing our lives through common humanity. This is a vice of reflection. I am willing to accept that the extensive literature on human presentist bias in decision-making makes presentism more likely to be excusable than, say, racism. And, in the case of Mercy, I am compelled to say that a number of other considerations would make it heartless to heap judgment on a history of societal abuse. To unwork societal abuse fully and deeply, however, demands that we create a world that adequately prevents us from slipping into presentism, whether excusable or not.

One thought

too few

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