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Exploiting Posterity

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> —If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever.
> – George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Imagine a world scorched dry by climate change, stripped of its vibrant ecosystems and unable to nurture life in its myriad forms. Or imagine a future burdened by debt, inherited from choices made by the current generation. In such a world would future generations be *wronged* by our actions today? What responsibilities do we have towards those who come after us?

Our responsibilities to future generations can be framed as a matter of just allocations of resources.[1] A rich philosophical literature explores how benefits and burdens should be distributed across society and between generations. These discussions on distributive justice typically focus on the *pattern* of resource distribution, asking what constitutes a fair share. For instance, utilitarians advocate for distributions that maximise a chosen moral metric, while prioritarians emphasize improving the situation of the worse off. Ultimately, all these theories of distributive justice grapple with the core question of fair allocations. In this essay, I propose a novel interpretation of intergenerational justice in the context of climate change, one that is not centred around the notion of fair allocations: excessive emissions unjustly manifest the domination position of the living generation over posterity, constituting exploitation. The current generation leverages their arbitrary and undue power for personal gain, effectively exploiting future generations.

The concept of exploitation is particularly relevant here because exploitation theory often focuses not merely on the final distribution of outcomes but also on the conditions under which transactions occur. I contend that certain intergenerational transactions, specifically those concerning climate impacts, are unjust precisely due to these unfair underlying conditions. While intergenerational exploitation remains a relatively underexplored area within the literature, some scholars maintain that exploitation can only occur between contemporaries (Vrousalis, 2022, 112). Others argue that intergenerational exploitation is possible but offer diverging reasons and conditions for what makes such transactions exploitative (cf. Bertram 2009; Mulkeen 2023; Rendall 2011).

The central claim I defend is that the current generation exploits posterity through the unjust exercise of arbitrary power for personal gain. I develop this argument in three steps. After preliminary remarks, I first critique, in Section 2, the existing accounts on intergenerational exploitation for neglecting the central role of power. Second, in Section 3.1, I contend that, contrary to Vrousalis (2022, 112), intergenerational exploitation is possible on his account. Third, in Section 3.2, I argue that the intergenerational context is fundamentally characterised by unequal arbitrary power relations: the current generations dominate posterity. We exploit posterity when we instrumentalise this domination position for personal gain. Finally, Section 3.3 presents a concrete case of intergenerational exploitation, drawing on a climate policy proposal by Broome and Foley (2016). Broome and Foley maintain that we can solve the climate crisis by letting future generations compensate the current generation for a transition towards sustainability.

[1] Resources should here be understood broadly. It can refer to physical goods such as natural resources, income, or wealth, but it can also refer to capabilities. Capabilities are "positive freedoms" to attain a set of different functionings (Sen 1980).

1. Preliminaries on exploitation

Broadly construed, the term 'exploitation' refers to someone illegitimately receiving too much for too little. Wertheimer (1999, 16) follows this colloquial expression and defines exploitation as benefitting from a transaction that is, in some way, unfair to the exploited. On this broad definition, any transaction that is unfair qualifies as exploitative. Consider a paradigmatic case of exploitation from Vrousalis (2022, 15):

> *The Pit: A* and *B* are alone in the desert. *A* finds *B* lying at the bottom of a pit. *A* offers *B* costless rescue, on condition that *B* works for *A* for $1/day for the rest of her life. *B* accepts.

In the Pit case, *A* benefits from a transaction that is unfair to *B*. Yet, different accounts of exploitation provide different conditions for what precisely makes the Pit case unfair and hence exploitative. Some maintain that the unfairness lies in the attitude *A* has towards *B*: *A* fails to treat *B* with equal concern of respect.[2] Others maintain that the unfairness lies in *A*'s restriction of *B*'s freedom.[3] In this essay, I adopt Vrousalis' account of exploitation as domination. On this account, the Pit case is unfair because *A* uses his domination position to extract unilateral labour flow from *B*. That is, *A* enjoys superior power over *B* and can decide on a whim and with impunity whether he shall save *B*. He decides to instrumentalise these unequal power relations to obtain cheap labour from *B* for an extortionate price.

Vrousalis' account is the only account in the literature that inexplicably links the concepts of domination and exploitation. To exploit is to derive a benefit from unjust and unequal power dispositions and to dominate is to have the capacity to exploit (Vrousalis 2022, 74–75). I contend that the intergenerational setting is fundamentally characterised by *unjust power relations between the current generation and future ones*: the current generation dominates posterity (I develop this argument in Section 3.2). We exploit posterity when we instrumentalise this power for personal gain.

The Pit case is also illustrative for another reason. Note that the transaction in the Pit case is mutually beneficial and voluntary. Transactions between agents can be negative-sum, zero-sum or positive-sum. A negative-sum transaction is a transaction where the total losses exceed the total benefits meaning both agents are worse off. A zero-sum transaction is a transaction where the loss of one agent is equal to the gain of the other agent. A positive-sum transaction is a transaction where both agents benefit, and this surplus is divided (usually unequally) among the agents. Exploitation can occur in any of these types of transactions, but interesting cases are positive-sum transactions, such as in the Pit case.[4] It demonstrates how the distribution of outcomes is not the only factor relevant for moral assessment, but also the conditions under which these transactions take place.

As a final remark, the Pit case exemplifies exploitation among contemporaries. In this essay, I am concerned with exploitation across non-overlapping generations. Overlapping generations can certainly exploit one another: the young can exploit the elderly and vice versa. The relevant question is whether such exploitation is possible between non-overlapping generations. Consider three generations G_1, G_2, and G_3, as shown in *Figure 1*:[5]

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2 Equal concern and respect might here be expressed in the Kantian sense: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (Kant 1996, 80). In the Pit case, *A* arrogates to himself a superior moral status and deems *B* not worthy of the same level of respect: he uses *B* as a mere means for his own ends. Sample (2003) defends such an account.

3 Vrousalis (2022) falls under the freedom-based accounts.

4 The Pit case does not specify how much surplus value is created by the labour of B but it is reasonable to assume that it is higher than $1/day.

5 If G_1 can exploit G_3, I believe the case extends naturally to G_n, where $n \in \mathbb{N}$ such that G_i overlaps with $G_{i\pm1}$.

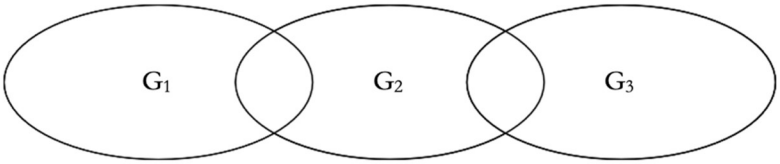

Figure 1.

G_1 overlaps with G_2, G_2 overlaps with G_3, but G_1 and G_3 do not overlap. Suppose that, in the Pit case, *A* represents G_1 and *B* represents G_3. This framing immediately highlights some tension that has led some scholars to believe that intergenerational exploitation is not possible. How can the current generation transact with an entity that, as of now, does not yet exist? How can G_1 obtain a benefit from G_3? These questions will be addressed in Section 3.1 and 3.3.

2. Exploitation as a breach of fair reciprocity

In this section, I introduce one existing account in the literature on intergenerational exploitation and highlight some difficulties. Bertram (2009) argues we exploit people when there is a breach of fair reciprocity.[6] For *A* to exploit *B,* Bertram proposes the following set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions:

> [1] *A* and *B* are linked together in cooperation.
> [2] The distribution of rewards resulting from that cooperation among *A* and *B* fails to be proportional to the distribution of the effortful contribution.

Bertram argues that exploitation occurs when individuals linked in cooperation fail to respect a principle of fair reciprocity. A minimal interpretation of this principle of fair reciprocity is that the distribution of awards is roughly proportional to the distribution of effortful contribution. The Pit case, on this account, is exploitative because there is disproportionality in the distribution of benefits from this transaction as almost all surplus value of the transaction goes to *A*. This account can be extended to future generations if one conceives of generations as a temporally extended system of cooperation. Bertram (2009, 155) mentions the example of the Liverpool Football Club as one example of such a temporally extended cooperative scheme. It was established in 1893 and remains to this day a successful football club. To sustain such an institution over time requires that multiple generations contribute their fair share. Bertram does not specify what fair contribution would practically entail in this context. One interpretation is that each generation must support the club, perhaps by purchasing tickets and attending matches. Exploitation then occurs when generations fail to respect this principle of fair reciprocity. For example, suppose that addressing climate change and maintaining a healthy environment is an intergenerational project that links together multiple non-overlapping generations. If G_1 depletes natural resources without contributing adequately to climate solutions, it exploits future generations: the rewards G_1 receives are significantly greater than its corresponding share of effortful contribution.

One issue with Bertram's account is that he does not provide a clear definition of what it means to be 'linked in cooperation.' He provides the example of a factory that endures across several generations, where each generation contributes to its ongoing operation by putting in their fair share. In such a stylised example, it is easy to conceive multiple generations as connected in a mutual enterprise. However, outside these hypothetically constructed scenarios, it becomes more difficult to identify real-world intergenerational

[6] Other accounts that focus on intergenerational exploitation include Rendall (2011), Liberto (2014), and Mulkeen (2023). A detailed discussion of each of these accounts fall outside the scope of this essay, but it should be noted that none of them are centred around the concept of domination.

projects. Plausibly, the climate crisis is one such project that links non-overlapping generations in cooperation. Yet, without a clear explication of [1], the account leaves many questions unanswered.

My main issue with Bertram's account is the proportionality stipulation in [2]. Some authors have argued that proportionality is neither necessary nor sufficient for exploitation. Let me first illustrate sufficiency. As Mulkeen (2023, 760) notes, gift giving violates this principle of fair reciprocity. There is a disproportional non-reciprocal distribution of benefits, yet gifts are not exploitative. A lack of reciprocity also does not appear to be necessary for exploitation. Consider a variation on the Pit case:

> *A Proportional Pit case: A* and *B* are alone in the desert. *A* finds *B* lying at the bottom of a pit. *A* offers *B* costless rescue, on condition that *B* works for *A* for a wage that reflects proportional effort for the rest of her life. *B* accepts.

Intuitively, the amended Pit case still seems exploitative, but on Bertram's account, there is no exploitation, because there is proportionality in the distribution of rewards and effortful contribution. Note that the final distribution between *A* and *B* might still be highly unequal in this example. Perhaps *A* has capital or certain means of production that allow him to generate a lot of surplus value with the labour of *B*. It seems as if the Pit case is exploitative for a different reason besides the lack of proportionality. Namely, it is the instrumentalisation of the unequal power relations between *A* and *B* which makes the Pit case exploitative. *A* dominates *B* and uses his domination position for personal gain.

3. Intergenerational Exploitation

3.1. Extending Vrousalis' account

In this section, I develop the second step of the argument by showing how Vrousalis' account can be extended to the intergenerational setting. Vrousalis (2022) defends an account of exploitation as domination. Yet, he provisionally concludes that G_1 cannot exploit G_3. He states: "*Labour and effortful contribution do not flow backwards in time*. So G_1 cannot exploit G_3" (Vrousalis 2022, 112, emphasis in the original). First, I introduce his account and then I show how it can be extended to the intergenerational case.

On an exploitation as domination account, *A* exploits *B* if *A* benefits from a transaction with *B* in which *A* dominates *B*. The relation between exploitation and domination is one of instrumentalisation. Exploitation occurs when one *instrumentalises* their domination position for personal gain. Consider the Non-Servitude Proviso (Vrousalis, 2023, p. 67):

> *Non-Servitude Proviso:* For any able-bodied and able-minded agents or groups engaged in mandatory mutually-affecting cooperation, and barring any special justification that exempts them, none should possess unilateral control over the labour of any other.

The Non-Servitude Proviso provides a *pro tanto* reason against unilateral control of the labour of others. That is, we have a strong normative reason to oppose domination relations among individuals for they give the dominator unilateral control over his subject. Suppose two individuals, *A* and *B*, work together on a collective project. Barring any special justification, the Non-Servitude Proviso establishes that it is permissible that *A* and *B* work unequal amounts of time on this project as long as this inequality does not reflect unequal power. The Non-Servitude Proviso also illustrates why the Pit case is exploitative. In the Pit case, *A* possesses unjust unilateral control over *B* and uses this domination position to extract some cheap labour flow from *B*.

Note that on Vrousalis' account, exploitation is necessarily cashed out in terms of *labour*. This is also the reason why he rejects the possibility of intergenerational exploitation, because does not flow backwards in time directly. At present, an individual in G_1 cannot extract labour from an individual in G_3,

as the latter does not yet exist. In the intergenerational context I adopt a broader notion of what it means to benefit from a domination position. Here, benefit may sometimes take the form of omission—of failing to act—and yet still count as a benefit. Although it may be possible to conceptualise the extraction of intergenerational labour flow, it likely takes a different form. Consider, for example, the case of debt imposition. Current generations can create a debt and impose this on posterity. Future people might then be bound to pay off this debt through labour or effortful contribution. In this way, the present generation may extract labour flow *indirectly* from future generations. This appropriation of labour flow is not direct, but through financial mechanisms whose benefit lies in the present access to resources.

I now turn to the question of how the current generation can exploit future generations. On an exploitation as domination account, exploitation is to benefit from a domination position. In Section 3.2, I define what constitutes a domination position and argue that the relation between the current generation and future generations is one of domination. Here I show how the current generation can use their position of domination to extract a benefit from non-overlapping generations.

One way might be through the use of overlapping generations. While future generations cannot directly transact with the present, intermediate generations can act as intermediaries. Recall generations G_1, G_2, and G_3. G_2 could pay a fee to G_1, with the expectation that G_3 will later compensate G_2. In this way, a chain of payments enables an indirect transaction between the present and the future. A practical implementation of this idea can be found in the structure of pension systems. Pension systems are funded by one generation and pay out benefits to another. Another way for the current generation to benefit from posterity is through loaning and borrowing money. The current generation can loan money and impose a debt on future generations. In this manner current generations borrow from future generations. Even though the future generation is not an actual financial agent borrowed from, contracting debt does have the effect of moving real resources from future generations to the present generation. It is effectively a *real* payment from future people to current people, which leads to decreasing purchasing power of future generations.

These mechanisms are just two ways into how the current generation can benefit from their domination position. In reality, there might be a myriad of ways the present can exploit their temporal power for personal gain. I have highlighted the previous two mechanisms, because some philosophers maintain that some of these transactions are justified because they are mutually beneficial. However, consider a starker example: G_1 decides to extract all natural resources from the planet, leaving nothing behind for G_3. On my account, this would also constitute exploitation as it is an exercise of arbitrary power for personal gain. But unlike the mutually beneficial scenarios, this scenario would involve a zero-sum transaction: the benefits of G_1 equate to the losses of G_3.

3.2 Republican domination

This section advances the third step in the argument that the intergenerational context is fundamentally characterised by domination relations. To do so, I draw from republicanism, a strand within political theory and philosophy that takes political liberty as one of its central pillars. I first summarise the republican conception of freedom as non-domination and then I argue how this characterisation is also prevalent in the intergenerational context. Republican theorists define freedom as non-domination or independence from arbitrary power (Lovett 2010; Pettit 1997). Consider the Kindly Master:

Kindly Master: The kindly master owns a slave, but never actually interferes with her.

The republican notion of freedom is a response to the classical negative interpretation of freedom. In the latter interpretation, freedom is usually defined in terms of interference. For instance, Hobbes (1651, chapter

21) defines liberty as: "(…) the absence of opposition (by opposition I mean external impediments of motion)." In this interpretation, the slave in Kindly Master is considered free, as she does not experience actual external interference. Republican theorists hold that interference is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom. The slave in Kindly Master is unfree due to the mere possibility of arbitrary interference of the master. She is under a relation of domination towards the master regardless of whether she is interfered with or not.[7] Freedom in republican terms is a relational concept. Pettit (2011, 709) uses the analogy of a doorkeeper to illustrate this point:

> Are you free just insofar as both doors are open in the choice between *A* and *B*? Not necessarily. What freedom ideally requires in the republican book is not just that the doors be open but that there be no doorkeeper who can close a door – or jam it, or conceal it – more or less without cost, there is no doorkeeper on whose goodwill you depend for one or another of the doors remaining open.

Canonical examples of domination include slavery and feudalism, where individuals exist in a relationship with a master who could at any point, at will and with impunity, interfere with their lives. Lovett (2010, 120) argues that domination relations are characterized by three key features: unequal power relations, dependency, and arbitrariness. Unequal power implies that *A* enjoys significantly more power over *B* than *B* enjoys over *A*. Dependency means that the dominated party is, to some extent, reliant on the relationship with the dominator—leaving the relationship would come at a significant cost. Finally, republican theorists contend that domination involves the exercise of arbitrary power. Lovett defines arbitrariness procedurally: power is arbitrary when it is not in some way procedurally constrained. Accordingly, non-domination can be achieved if there are externally enforced constraints. These might for example be rules or regulations effectively governing power and constraining the dominator in a way that he cannot act on a whim and with impunity.

It is important to note that unequal power and dependency, on their own, are not sufficient to constitute a domination relation. A university librarian holds a degree of power over me, as she has the ability to prevent me from graduating if I do not return the books I borrowed. Yet, this is not the relevant sort of domination that republicans are concerned with. Domination requires that power is exercised arbitrarily. In this example, the librarian's power is constrained by institutional rules and is therefore not arbitrary.

On the republican interpretation domination is inimical to freedom. Feudalism and slavery are extreme cases, because under feudalism and institutions of slavery the three relevant characteristics are pushed to their relative extremes. Masters hold vast unequal and arbitrary power over their subjects. I contend that our relation towards posterity can similarly be characterised as such a domination relation.

First, there are unequal power relations between the current generation and those who follow. These power asymmetries are qualitatively different compared to the power differences between contemporaries (Meyer 2021, 3). The current generation has the ability to affect the well-being, quality of life, and interests of future lives. We might, for instance, choose to consume all available resources, leaving only enough to satisfy our own needs.

Second, future generations are in a strong dependency situation. They are in no position but to accept the situation imposed upon them. In fact, the dependency appears again to be even stronger when compared to paradigmatic cases of domination. A slave has the possibility to leave the slavery condition by

[7] This is not to suggest that the slave in Kindly Master is worse off than one who is subject to constant interference. Clearly, a situation involving a benevolent despot is preferable to a malicious despot. But would we say that the slave in Kindly Master is more *free*? Republican civics deny this. From this perspective, a despot remains a despot regardless of their intentions. Benevolence does not eliminate the underlying structure of domination.

trying to run away and escape. Although the costs associated with this exit strategy are extremely high—potentially involving death or serious harm—the option still exists. For future generations, by contrast, it is an impossibility to escape the situation conferred upon them. They can do nothing but live in the circumstances we confer upon them.

Third, the power wielded by the current generation is arbitrary as there are no external constraints effectively governing this power. There are no measures in place that force the current generation to track the interests of those yet to exist. That is, there are no institutionalised representations of future people. The current generation can decide on a whim and with impunity to burn all the crops of the land, keeping just enough to feed themselves because there is no voice to oppose this.

Given the above, I contend that the current generation holds a strong domination position over future generations. In the language of the Pit case, G_3 finds itself in the bottom of the pit, due to the nature of their temporal position in relation to G_1. They are vulnerable to the exercise of arbitrary power and G_1 has the capacity to decide their fate on a mere whim and with impunity.

An upshot for the domination account is that it identifies certain relationships as problematic even when they benefit the dominated. This can also be illustrated again in the Pit case. *B* might benefit from the transaction with *A*, but there is still an objectionable master-slave relationship between *A* and *B*.[8] A domination conception of intergenerational justice argues that we do not exhaust our duties by providing future generations with their relevant fair share. Instead, it demands that we confront the root issue: the unjust asymmetries of power between present and future generations. As Orwell stated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever" (1949, 188). While grim, the quote captures the enduring danger of power exercised without accountability, precisely the kind of domination we risk imposing on posterity.

A critic might ask: "how can we *not* exploit posterity?" If the current generation enjoys a strong domination position over posterity, there might be nothing one can do but benefit from this, but this conclusion happens too quickly. Domination is a scalar concept: one can be more or less dominated depending on the severity of the unequal power relations, dependency, and arbitrariness. It might not be possible to achieve complete non-domination in the intergenerational context, but it is possible to reduce the degree of domination. One way of achieving this is by reducing the arbitrariness of the power wielded by the current generation. Recall that power is arbitrary if it is not externally constrained. There is a large literature devoted to proxy representations of future generations in democratic decision-making (Beckman 2008; Ekeli 2008). It is possible to set up an ombudsman that could act on perceived expectations of posterity. While this might fail to achieve complete non-domination, it still reduces the arbitrariness because it imposes some procedural external constraints on the power wielded by the current generation.

3.3 An illustration: Broome's efficiency without sacrifice

In this final section, I provide one example of intergenerational exploitation, arguing that the climate proposal put forward by Broome and Foley (2016) constitutes such a case. They contend that greenhouse gasses create an economic inefficiency through an externality. This externality can be incorporated into the price of carbon by imposing a tax on future generations. This is a Pareto improvement as both the current

[8] A similar point carries over to the literature on distributive justice. Suppose that the current generation adopts a sufficientarian principle and ensures that we leave future generations enough resources to attain a threshold. Meyer and Roser (2009) defend such an intergenerational sufficientarian duty. On a domination conception, even if the resulting allocation is just there is still a problematic relationship between the present generation and future ones.

and future generations are better off after this transaction. Consider the following analogy (Broome and Foley 2016, 157-158):

> Two Cities: City *A* and city *B* are connected via a river. This river flows from *A* to *B*. City *A* has a factory that benefits only *A* but pollutes the river and thereby harms *B*. The marginal cost of polluting for city *A* is zero.

Standard economic theory tells us that a Pareto improvement is possible in this scenario by letting city *B* pay city *A* to emit less. Both cities are better off as a result of this transaction: a Pareto improvement.

According to Broome and Foley, the climate crisis is similar in the relevant sense to Two Cities, where city *A* represents the current generation and city *B* future generations down the line. Broome and Foley propose several mechanisms through which future generations could compensate the current generation. Imagine, for instance, that city *A* regularly sends gifts to city *B* down the river. City *A* could send fewer 'gifts' down the river and as a result, be better off. These 'gifts' can be thought of as the earth, its resources and the infrastructure that the present generation leaves behind. I have already illustrated above in Section 3.1, through overlapping generations, another way of facilitating compensation. A final mechanism Broome and Foley (2016, 156) propose—and the one they most strongly endorse—is through intergenerational borrowing. They advocate for a global financial institution: The World Climate Bank. This bank can issue climate bonds to finance a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources while also compensating for the current generation for potential losses incurred during the transaction. This action can be dubbed 'borrowing from the future,' where G_1 takes out a loan and imposes a debt on G_3.

In an earlier publication, Broome (2012, 34) points out three options to deal with the climate crisis. The first option, 'business-as-usual,' is the worst option and essentially entails doing nothing. The second option is 'Efficiency With Sacrifice,' which implies that the current generation takes action and reduces emissions at their own cost. This can also be achieved through a carbon tax on contemporaries. The third option is 'Efficiency Without Sacrifice.' In the last option, future generations compensate the current generation for the transition through, for instance, a World Climate Bank as outlined above. He notes that while the second option might be better in terms of justice and the overall distribution of burdens and benefits, the third option is better than doing nothing. Decades of ineffective climate negotiations have made the second option unlikely, so Broome concludes that we should opt for efficiency without sacrifice even though it might be unjust and exacerbate inequalities.

In this section, my aim is not to defend or reject the proposal, but rather to demonstrate that it can plausibly be interpreted as a case of intergenerational exploitation. If my interpretation is correct, we at least have a *pro tanto* objection to the proposal on the grounds that it is exploitative. Recall that on an exploitation as domination account, exploitation is the instrumentalisation of a domination position. Under Broome's proposal it is evident that the current generation benefits from a transaction with future generations. Granted, this transaction might be mutually beneficial and future generations might be better off as a result, but this does not preclude the transaction from being exploitative.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the current generation exploits posterity when they exercise arbitrary power over those who come after us for personal gain. While some existing accounts in the literature acknowledge the conceptual possibility of intergenerational exploitation, none place domination at the centre of their analysis. I have contended that intergenerational relations inherently shaped by power imbalances: the current generation dominates those yet to exist.

What this essay ultimately calls for is a reorientation of our understanding of intergenerational justice. A reorientation of our responsibilities towards posterity. It is not enough to simply ensure that future generations attain a certain threshold of well-being or leave them their fair shares. We must instead shift our focus on the structural power asymmetries between the present and the future. Future individuals, by their mere temporal position, find themselves at the bottom of a pit, continually vulnerable to the potential exercise of arbitrary power. It is vividly illustrated by Orwell's depiction of boot stamping on a human face—forever. The current generation holds the capacity to instrumentalise those in this pit. This can manifest in various ways, from imposing debts on future generations 'for their own good' to replacing natural habitats with mere synthetic replicas. While it may not be possible to achieve complete non-domination, it is possible to give a voice to posterity. This essay serves as a call for a procedural element in intergenerational justice. A call for the representation of those who come after us, to mitigate the subjugation by the arbitrary whims of those who came before.

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"Only ever thinking with"

An interview with Willem Schinkel

By Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra

On the 19th of June, 2025, I had the pleasure of speaking with Willem on behalf of the ESJP. I wanted to talk about the *how* of thinking: to share how his commitment to imagining less violent ways of living, gives form to his intellectual practice. We spoke about humour, and the role of taste; "the ways bodies are attuned to the world, to the affects that they are receptible for, the way their attention is structured and focused." We spoke about reading associatively, and the work that is needed to write at all, the banging-your-head-against-the-wall-of-it-all. After all, "We are just moving with currents." In a time when academic philosophy is predominantly marked by structures of masculinity, whiteness, individualism, and property, I believe and hope this conversation comes to show that philosophy can refuse adaptation, can move with and through the world. All thinking, living, ideas, emerge from togetherness, proliferating in messy, shared directions. From working with students to writing together, amidst the stories we may craft, we must remind ourselves, and put into practice: there is only ever *thinking with*.

Georgina. *Willem, in your work you have described thinking as freedom, and you're also fond of calling this a form of woekeren, proliferation. Can you recall a moment or experience that first drew you to this?*

Willem. I can't recall a specific moment, but I think it's partly a consequence of trying to break out of certain habits of thought that are very much endemic to philosophy. People start doing all kinds of exegesis, they take one specific thinker, or compare one thinker with another, and then think that this is philosophy. To me, this seemed like a form of scholasticism attuned to the way academics build careers. This felt unsatisfactory, and it felt like a hindrance, something that gets in the way of the immediacy between thought and the world. What came instead was a more ecological way of thinking, influenced by philosophers like Deleuze, who writes about thought as affect. You are affected by something in the world. It is not just 'you,' locked in your mind. That is not where thought happens. I think the notion of proliferation, of life as proliferation, is very ecological, and I have become more attuned to that over time. It corresponded with my own mind. The way I thought that my mind works and always has, is as a machine of association. You never know where things come from, but it will be some outside thing that you are affected by, something that *gets you to think*. It's nonsensical to think that philosophy means you just sit down, in a chair, and start to 'think real hard.' You are expected to become an expert in, say, Kant or Heidegger—whichever white guy—and think that philosophy means to write about philosophers. But this has never been my experience.

Georgina. *We see there are certain thinkers, such as Luhmann, Benjamin, Deleuze, Bouteldja, Spinoza, W.E.B. Du Bois, that keep reoccurring across your work. In my perception, this is more as a methodological spilling, an associative usage as well. How did that arise?*

Willem. I think it's a learning process. Some of these thinkers have been there longer than others, and the moment others emerge, the ones you already knew start to change. You're forced to rethink your attachment to certain things. When you start to discover Du Bois, for example, you have to rethink the way you'd previously processed certain white European thinkers. Which doesn't mean you have to get rid of

them or discard them altogether, but you have to start thinking with them, against them, more than before. It's a continual process of learning. I'm not in the habit of throwing things away. I think I'm intellectually something of a hoarder. The way I buy books and read also attests to that. I'm all over the place, and I'm not happy to confine myself. But that also means I'm continuously looking for authors, for strands of thought, that help me get out of where I thought I was. I started out in a tradition, in some conception of critical theory, broadly conceived, ranging from Marx to Bourdieu. But I felt very dissatisfied with that, so I started to read, for instance, feminist theory, which really helped. From there, I moved on to queer theory and black studies. I think if you really want to learn, you have to continue to look for those places where it's initially uncomfortable. That is what I continuously try to do, which does not mean I discard work I've engaged with previously, but it does mean that that engagement will continuously change.

Georgina. *Do you keep a notebook for small ideas, things you might want to write about one day, even if they're not fully developed or seem a bit silly?*

Willem. Oh yes, I have all kinds of notebooks. The notebook practice is a whole story in and of itself. Some notebooks are on the computer, one has the length of a book already, some are physical. I don't know what gives rise to either. But this is again such a good testament to the whole illusory idea of an 'individuated thinker'. I'm just moving with certain currents. I am swayed in certain directions, affectively, as part of something really underestimated in academic philosophy, which is *taste*. Why do people do certain kinds of philosophy? Taste. Analytic philosophers, continental philosophers, they subdivide themselves into these camps, and of course they have all kinds of arguments for that. But ultimately, it's a matter of taste. It's a way in which their bodies are attuned to the world, to the affects that they are receptible for, the way their attention is structured and focused. We are just moving with currents. So, why do I in certain cases have a physical notebook, and sometimes a file on a computer? There is no reason whatsoever, there is no rationality. Who knows! And why do I start to write a certain book? Why does one thing all of a sudden turn from notes into a book, why do I decide that in the next years I really want to focus one certain thing next to all the other things I do. I want to write book about, in this case, property. Can you really account for that? I highly doubt it. You can craft a *story* about it, and it's important to do that. But it's never a causal account, which is also one way to think about the freedom of thought; it's free in the sense that it's undetermined, or under-determined. You cannot say "this is why." If you could, it would be a totally heteronomous thing, because there would be something akin to a causal connection. To not have that be the case, it has to be free. But freedom, then, does not mean that there is an individuated autonomous agent. It is the freedom of participating in certain proliferations that are ongoing in the world. There are moments of choice, because there's all kinds of proliferation, and some of them are fascist. So you must continuously ask yourself: how do I want to resonate with what's going on in the world?

Georgina. *I noticed that if I don't have some sort of idea, I find it very difficult to start a paper. Teachers can tell you to write what you know, but I sometimes feel like I am waiting for God, or Godot, or something. Across all those proliferations and the ideas you take in and associate with, when does the writing begin for you?*

Willem. I think I understand what the teachers mean to say, because I think it's no use waiting for an idea if you don't start to engage with something. This engagement can be through reading texts, but it can also happen by taking reading less literally, by engaging with other people, with the world. But personally, I think *through* writing as well, absolutely. In some books I will have a rough outline, sometimes I may even subdivide it into chapters, and order my notes per chapter. But at the same time, even if I have that in a very detailed way, I know that once I write, twice as many ideas will emerge, at least. The writing is really the creative process. But there's no way to write without reading, and you have to continuously be engaged with

other work. That is another reason why this individuated idea of creative authorship is such a problematic notion. It's one of those concepts Walter Benjamin writes about as being very useful for fascism, and I think he is right. If you really look at how people write anything, it's just a web of relations from start to finish. Obviously, there is a particular singularity to the itinerary that you travel. But you read in order to write, and you have to write to develop something.

Georgina. *I like that when you let go of this individuated subject, you come across all these other people in other fields. But I think this is reflected in your style of writing, as well. One thing that particularly strikes me is that, whereas we tend to think of philosophy as this very heavy, often boring form of critique, you are very funny. You actually are really funny! You have a way of describing something that is present in your dissertation already when you list the antinomies of violence, across Theorie van de Kraal and your most recent Aphonismen, and I admire this. Is this gesture towards humor a conscious choice for you? Or is it something that happens halfway in writing?*

Willem. That is nice to hear, thank you. Yes, it is totally conscious. because, in one way, and that is also reflected in my style: I'm not a purist, I'm not an aestheticist. I think writing very often is banging against a wall, it's trying to break through something, it's a tool and sometimes a weapon. Humour is a very good way of doing that. Laughter is very important. Laughing together is one of the most important things in the world, right? But if that is the case, it is inconceivable to me why academic work should often be so humourless and not funny at all. The same goes for a lack of love. We know that love is the most important thing in the world. But this makes it very strange to then keep love outside of philosophy, to park it somewhere else, preferably in heteropatriarchal relationships under the label of "romantic love," while here, in academic philosophy, we do "thinking," loveless.

There are ways to place readers at a distance from some preconceived habits of thought, and humor is one of those things. There can also be shock. Not for the shock itself, but just in naming, renaming, redescribing things. Sometimes, this is halfway revolutionary. Just this morning I was writing for a book about the Earth and climate, where I note how important it is not to individuate and moralize actions. But it is also impossible *not* to note the ritualistic celebration of carbon emissions that exists in the roasting of dead animals on barbecue sets, the moment it's nice and warm outside! This is a very weird way of participating in the catastrophe of global warming. It gets warmer, there are more warm days, and then people start to burn coal and roast dead animals, participating, as in a metonymic way, in the larger catastrophe. Of course, making explicit what we already know has an alienating, estranging, or shocking effect. Same as when we make it explicit that the most popular electric car in this country is produced by a South African neo-Nazi with nostalgia for apartheid, who also happens to be the richest dude in the world, meaning he's the most successful exploiter of other human beings and of the Earth. This is stating facts, but naming the constellation of facts in this way works; people think, or at least this is what I'm often told, "huh, I hadn't seen it like that." And that helps. Not to start bickering about whether it is the truth or not, it helps in the same way that I try to read in order to think something else, to get myself *out* of where I was.

The most important thing in writing, is that the best writing is done together. All the writing I do with Rogier is a way to get out of the illusion of individuated authorship. When we wrote *Theorie van de Kraal*, I would write something and send it to him, he would write something and send it to me, and then we would just get to work with it. Each sentence has been revised. Ultimately, we don't know who wrote what. At times, you think you know where a particular chapter is going, and then when the text comes back it's a completely different direction. But we always accept this. There is never a moment of, "wait a minute, I don't agree with that, because we wanted to make *this* point, didn't we?" No, there is a total acceptance of

whatever comes your way. We have to deal with that, and that is just life, this being thrown amidst currents, proliferations, and finding bearings by calibrating one's modes of attention and attunement.

Georgina. *I think what you do is more than just naming. You mentioned affect, which is something I'm interested in, along with queer theory and reparative reading approaches. It seems to me that in your writing, you are very aware that in writing one can create a world in which the reader is affected. Just as when you say that our proclivity for certain theories is a matter of taste. Taste is embodied. That way of writing, which is more aesthetic and affective, doesn't seem to follow a strict line from one author to the next. In your work, there's an attunement, resonance, with certain imagery or a feeling that seem to deliberately guide your process. But in stark contrast is much of philosophy, where the method still is to move from person to person, reference to reference.*

Willem. Yes, taste is the way you are attuned to certain affects and not to others, and it relates to the way in which your attention is calibrated. What nowadays is called philosophy, is academic philosophy. Paradoxically, however, all the philosophers that are revered in that discipline have explicitly stated that *precisely that is not philosophy*. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Deleuze come to mind. They state this is not philosophy, it's a weird way of going about it. If you read Kant—and I mean, I read all the critiques of Kant during my years as a PhD student, during my lunch break—sure, he will talking about Hume and the like, but it's not like he would say, "oh, this person wrote this, and that person wrote that, and we compare them and that's what philosophy is." Kant is also riffing! At the same time, it's important to acknowledge what has been said and written before. There has to be engagement with the history of thought and there has to be a degree of rigor there, even though rigor in canonical practices is not the same as practicing philosophy. That's why I'm always, maybe overly, concerned with footnotes. Even the *Aphonisms* book has footnotes, because it's important to show that I'm just a singular voice in a larger web. But it's still a continual process of learning. In the same way, I think I'm still often too wedded to a certain idea of 'critique.' It's still lingering, and it's hard to kill. I think that process could be much improved. Which is to say: there's a little critical theory dude inside me and it needs to be killed.

Georgina. *I think the moment you step into writing that is acknowledged for being affective, for being a way to conjure up certain imaginaries, you inherently become interdisciplinary. When you no longer have to follow through the entire cemetery of the white men, and instead look at affect and the act of affecting your reader, you can turn to artists, as they know all about that. You, in turn, have written quite a bit about art. In one paper, for instance, you end up discussing various artworks grappling with 'the face' and algorithmic surveillance technologies. How do you see your relation to art?*

Willem. Yes, that specific paper was written with Patricia de Vries, and I fully acknowledge that all the knowledge about art in that paper came from her! But I have written about art, more through the notion of the art world, which I find sociologically very interesting. At some point I want to write a book about a sociological conception of art. In a way, this stands somewhat queer to the rest of my work, so I am not sure, it will be written after I'm retired, probably. I am not a pure sociologist at all. I'm usually described as a 'sociologist and philosopher,' and I'm okay with that—if labels have to be attached, that will do. A couple of years ago I had, for some occasion, to list the number of disciplines I have published in, which came to something like twelve different ones. The world is not as discrete as the academy is, the world is continuous. It's no use trying to stick to the boundaries of disciplines, but this means you have to do a lot of work, which for me is reading a lot. But I never limit myself to one thing, it doesn't fit with me as a person at all, and it never has from the beginning. I cannot conceive, for instance, how you can write anything without also being historical. It's just not possible.

Georgina. *That reminds me of Lauren Berlant.*

Willem. Yes, and Berlant is a very wise, very powerful author. Interestingly, that is somebody who wrote as an esthete, very aesthetically curated. My writing is incomparable. I don't think I have anywhere near the level of care that Berlant had in their writing. I'm not a perfectionist either. When I write, it's a form of excretion. What to do with that? You flush it and you move on! It's for use. I don't have a lot of love for earlier books I wrote, either.

I think there are two things going on though. One is that I'm getting older, and I actually start to like recent books, which is dangerous. I take it this means I'm starting to get less creatively attuned to things. The kind of rigidity that comes with age, perhaps. But I also note that looking back, there are certain themes that have always been there, even if I hate the way in which they were there then. It is no surprise to me that my dissertation was about violence. Everything I do still is concerned with the very limited ways in which thought and writing might contribute to inventing ways of living together with less violence. Looking back, that is certainly one red thread. But it's been funny to see students write master theses about my work as an 'oeuvre.' There is something to that I guess, but it's also pushing things into an overarching logic that I myself do not always think is there—but then maybe others can see this much better than I can. One problem I have is with the collaborative work, does an 'oeuvre' imply that the work I did with Rogier somehow entered my oeuvre? Well, yes and no. Things can exist in parallel universes at the same time.

Georgina. *But there are some Leitmotifs, sometimes. Phrases from Fanon, such as "certain hommes veulent enfler le monde de leur être,"*[1] *will come in as a recurring melody.*

Willem. Yes, and the most important one by far for me is by Walter Benjamin: "that things 'go on like this', *is* the catastrophe."[2] I take that quote everywhere I go. I could tattoo it, but that might feel too much like that story by Kafka, *In Der Strafkolonie*, where there is this machine that writes the law into the skin of the backs of people, and it writes it in such a way that it totally destroys these people. It somehow feels like it would be something like that to tattoo quotes.

Georgina. *Walter might not really like that, no. Now, you've mentioned that you do a lot of your best work with other people. What stands out is that you've earned deep admiration from students. It is one thing to be well liked as a teacher, but it is rare for a professor to also be political, to carry a sense of urgency and awareness of the world and its suffering. You have stated before that you have hope in the students, not the university, and you created the master 'Engaging Public Issues' that seems to reflect those values. Could you say a bit more about that?*

Willem. That's nice to hear, although I don't think most students at Erasmus University are particularly big admirers of me. But what's important is that it's the other way around as well: I admire the students I get to work with. Creating this master programme was also creating space for a particular kind of student that was previously very dispersed, and more unhappy than I would like to believe they currently are. I've just finished supervising the master theses of some of these students, and I'm struck by how 'grown-up' they have to be. Especially when I compare it to myself in my early twenties, when I felt very lonely being surrounded by neoliberals trying to make money, and I was nowhere near where they are. That tells you something about the world. Now, these students are at least together. I am in awe of what they do, interpersonally and in their activism, at the level of care they exhibit for each other, and how they connect this to their intellectual work. I can create a certain space, and for sure the archive in my head sometimes helps in our conversations, but it definitely works the other way around too.

1 Fran Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 219.

2 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* p. 473.

Georgina. I think *that kind of connection and collaboration also has to do with activism, particularly amongst your students.*

Willem. That is true. In a sense I do subscribe to the idea of the scholar-activist, but I find the initiative usually lies with students. Of course, I've been engaged in various kinds of activism for years, long before the master's programme. But most of that was quite traditional, as 'contributing to the public sphere,' engaging in debates, blablabla. At a certain point, it became clear that this was, overall, a rather useless way to spend my time and energy. Most of the activism I get involved in actually starts with students. We must recognize that, particularly within the university, whether it's about climate or Palestine, it always starts with students. Your role as an academic, then, can be to help wherever you can, whether it means doing groceries or doing a lecture at an encampment; whatever students need. That's what you do. The activism of a scholar aligns with that, but scholars tend not be the source of activism—which is not to say they can't and shouldn't get organized in better ways. But scholars will not be the start of the revolution, even though every revolution has had its books and thinkers. It's important for me to be very explicit about that. This also relates to certain academics who feel that, especially during student protests, their role is to mediate between the students and the university board. I abhor that kind of approach. I react to it viscerally, it makes my hair stand on end. You have to follow your heart in your allegiances, and help students wherever you can and not think for them, only ever with them.

Georgina. *Do you think there's something about being a student that involves a different relation to theory?*

Willem. Not necessarily to students per se, because it very much depends on the more general conditions, on the general relations of production, and on the general regime in which whiteness and masculinity operate in the world. When I was a student, this level of activism we have today did not exist. This was a time when the general idea—which I, too, only gradually began to sense and unravel, distance myself from—that the world as it was kind of fine, and that if you were white, you could make a life, a dignified life within the existing order. For most of my master's students, it is clear that this is no longer the case, and they are acutely aware of it. They are aware that whiteness, masculinity and capital are the main hindrances to ways of living with less violence. This is nothing inherent to being a student. Yet being a student does mean that you are more receptive than the ones who think that they can teach. I obviously include myself in that. Under different circumstances, that receptiveness can translate into a very adept way of mimicking, of noting "this is the game, and this is how it's played, so I'm going to adapt to this current order as soon as possible." Most students do this, but the students that I am surrounded with tend to have a different response. When I was a student, there were way less students that had the non-adaptive response, that did not say "I'm gonna mimic this." But students can go either way given the general conditions, and they are as dangerous as anybody.

Georgina. *One thing I've been thinking about is generosity. Working in collaboration, being with others matters a lot to me, and I find academia preys on generosity, it perverts generosity. Generosity arises despite the university, and we need to foster it among ourselves. Being a teacher can be generous, just like working with someone, and letting them run with an idea that emerged between you. I've been told that back in the day, if you found something special, a reference or an idea, you were told to guard it like a little egg so no one would steal it. I think only a system creates that kind of attitude, because with the people I work with, it simply never has occurred to us, and never would.*

Willem. And happily so, but this system is still here. This system is the affective reflection of a regime of intellectual property rights. That has probably been the most innovative addition to the legal superstructure of capitalism in the last hundred years. Intellectual property rights have become central to

appropriation and to calibrating the work people do. That logic is everywhere. And yes, academics sit on so-called discoveries or ideas. In a sense, I can also feel that. Sometimes you think, "am I really going to say what I feel in this meeting, or will someone just run away with it?" The impulse is to hold back, but I try to resist that, especially with students. And I also think that whatever I'm saying now is not really mine. Tomorrow I'll think of something else and work with that, and this "I'll think of something else" simply means something else came my way. But we are trained, and disciplined, to sit on things, to *own them*. That is a very problematic feature of the university, but it is also a feature of the capitalist mode of production more broadly. It is a way of maintaining artificial scarcity. If you have a reference that could be useful to others, but you sit on it until you publish, so that it becomes a gateway everyone has to pass through, then your reputation is propped up, and you can build a career from that. Academics make a career by claiming ownership, by establishing property. But property is nothing other than the creation of artificial scarcity.

This is deeply problematic, because it gets in the way of living together in ways that are much less tense, much more relaxed. But the idea that something is *your* idea, is really something you need to be rescued from. You can make a career by making a name and collecting all kinds of symbolic capital. But I truly think this is something that leads to unhappiness and a sense of profound hollowness inside. Because it is ego, and ego kills you. People suffer from ego, I too suffer from ego. I am very convinced that especially those who are very well known as in "these are brilliant thinkers," once they start to actually believe that themselves, they will be very, very unhappy. They need to be rescued from that delusion. Even though, obviously, they're not a priority.

Georgina. *As a final note, is there anything you'd like to share with students reading this? Maybe those just starting out in philosophy or trying to find their way in these uncertain moments?*

Willem. It's kind of difficult to put myself in that position, but I would say that the only way I, as a student, ever really felt like I was learning something, was by breaking out of the curriculum. The curriculum is there, and it consumes a lot of your time. But it is the result of a set of contingent choices made by a group of very arrogant people who think they can decide what is important. It becomes a way of going through the motions. You're stuck in that system, and you have to get the grades. Pending revolution, this is what we do. And I hate to say it, because it means giving people more work, but finding ways to step outside that structure can really help.

One way to step out is that you have to develop a very irrational reading practice. As I said, I'm in a fortunate position that allows me to afford a lot of books. Speaking of ownership*: I'm a total fetishist of books*. It's the only thing I am really interested in buying. And I do it, in part, out of a feeling that whatever happens, I will still have this, I'll still have access to the archive. The way I read is a mix. Sometimes I have specific things that I read for. Other times, I come across something completely random, online or elsewhere, and I have to buy it and start reading. The most irrational thing I do is this: I walk past my bookshelves, think, "huh?," take something out, and suddenly I'm reading it. Right in the middle of all kinds of other things I need to do, other things I'm already reading. Why? I don't know why, I have no idea why! It's totally irrational, and to think there would be a plan to this is nonsensical. But this method is at the same time incredibly useful if you want to make lateral connections and ignite a certain associative capacity in yourself. I sometimes get embarrassed when people say I seem to know something about everything, or that when teaching I can talk about almost anything. It's obviously such a masculine practice. But I simply try to inform myself, to push myself into all kinds of directions, and to do so in a way that acknowledges there are only ever lateral connections, by way of the proliferations through which the world works. So, in short, and I hate to say it, because it takes more time, but I do think it's rewarding: your reading should be guided in part

by a kind of rigorous discipline, some things are important to work through. But the other half should be completely unplanned, totally contingent, shaped by whatever you happen to bump into. That, to me, is a very rewarding combination.

BLITZ

Thomas Hobbes **A cup of tea**

Sounds like a category mistake, comparing them like this. They're both very imperial. Then I will, yeah, then I'll choose them both: you have to face all imperialisms at the same time. *Willem, it is a 'blitz,' huh.*

Aspects → Rhizome

(deep sigh) *Willem, lock in.* I will place an arrow from aspects to rhizome.

Rotterdam Krimpen

Boycotting AND **proletarisch winkelen**

Suits and ties **14 thousand angry beavers**

Angry what? *Beavers!* What are beavers? *The beavers!* What kind of beavers? *The ones in the water, building dams and such!*
Oh, beavers! The beavers! The beavers!

Walking **Cycling**

Walter Benjamin Spinoza

Gestell Bestel

None.

Ayn Rand Friedrich Hayek

Both thankfully dead.

Critique **Tough love**

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