

SYMPOSIUM
MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY FOR A BROKEN WORLD?



A PRÉCIS TO *ETHICS FOR A BROKEN WORLD*

BY

TIM MULGAN

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I

The Broken World

In my recent book *Ethics for a Broken World*, I imagine a future *broken world*—a place where resources are insufficient to meet everyone's basic needs, where a chaotic climate makes life precarious, where each generation is worse-off than the last, and where our affluent way of life is no longer an option.¹ In a philosophy class in that broken world, students and teachers look back in disbelief at the philosophy of a lost age of affluence (our own time), and try to make sense of the opulent worldview of affluent philosophers such as Nozick and Rawls.

The starkest contrast between the broken future and our affluent present is the lack of what John Rawls calls “favourable conditions.”² A society enjoys favourable conditions if it has reached a level of sophistication and prosperity such that its members can establish liberal democratic institutions to ensure that all basic needs are met without sacrificing any basic liberties. Modern liberal democracies in North America, Western Europe,

¹ Tim Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World: Imagining Philosophy After Catastrophe* (Montreal & Kingston-Itacha: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

² J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1999).

and Australasia clearly enjoy favourable conditions. And the material threshold is very modest. Liberal institutions do not require continuous economic growth, and a free society can remain comparatively poor. According to Rawls, virtually all modern societies enjoy favourable conditions.

To produce a clear, stark contrast with our affluent world, I stipulate that societies in the broken world cannot meet all basic needs. So they cannot possibly establish Rawlsian liberal institutions that both meet basic needs and protect basic liberties. In the broken world, favourable conditions are gone. Even if we do not regard the broken future as very likely, focusing on this worst-case scenario is a useful way to explore the limits and resources of our moral and political thinking.

I picture this scarcity, not as a one-off catastrophe, but as an ongoing fact of life. (A parallel might be the seasonal fluctuations in food supply experienced by traditional Inuit communities—Rawls's own example of a society lacking favourable conditions.) The scarcity of material resources (especially water) and an unpredictable climate mean that broken world societies periodically face population bottlenecks where not all can survive.

On the other hand, my broken world is not apocalyptic. Human societies do exist there. But each such society must institute a *survival lottery*—some institution that determines, in times of crisis or scarcity, who lives and who dies. For broken world political philosophers, the design of a just survival lottery is *the* central topic.

This device of imagining how actual future people might react to our contemporary philosophy is not merely a pedagogical marketing gimmick. It also plays a substantive philosophical role. The broken world affects moral *theory*, in three systematic ways, by removing three ubiquitous (and often unacknowledged)

presuppositions of contemporary moral philosophy. First, it introduces real conflicts between the interests of present and future people. This forces us to confront our obligations to distant future people. Second, if future people are worse off than present people, then we must ask what is truly *essential* to a flourishing human life. Third, a world where not all basic needs can be met raises tragic conflicts not found under favourable conditions.

Some moral theories cope better than others with distant future obligations, with declining well-being, or with the loss of favourable conditions. Introducing a broken future thus significantly alters the balance between competing moral and political theories.

Ethics for a broken world is an extended thought experiment. It asks how the inhabitants of one specific possible future might re-imagine our contemporary moral values, priorities, principles, idioms, or theories. By imagining different possible futures, we can explore the contingent limits of current morality. Such experiments are tentative and fallible, but they still offer valuable moral lessons. In particular, imaging the reactions of particular individuals in some specific future forces us to ask how (if at all) we might justify ourselves to them. This introduces a second-personal urgency into the otherwise abstract topic of intergenerational justice.

II

Outline of The Book

The book consists of lectures delivered by a philosophy teacher in the future broken world. The topics addressed are

those found in standard contemporary introductory courses in moral and political philosophy. (The book is thus designed to serve as a text for such a course, especially for students with a particular interest in environmental or development issues.)

An introductory lecture highlights those features of our present-day affluent world that would seem strange to a visitor from the broken future. These include natural abundance, social affluence, and stable climate; in addition to the distinctive features of contemporary philosophy.

The rest of the book is divided into four parts: libertarianism, utilitarianism, social contract, and democracy. Each part begins with several chapters outlining the relevant strand of affluent philosophy, and ends with a chapter applying the theory to the broken world. These final chapters sometimes take the form of dialogues between students. These dialogues are designed to represent the variety of different ways that future people might respond to affluent philosophy.

Part One deals with rights, focusing on a close reading of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.³ I suggest that broken world dwellers will be amazed that any of Nozick's affluent acolytes looked to *Anarchy, State and Utopia* for a *defence* of their rights—rather than reading the book, as its author obviously intended, as a sustained ironic *reductio ad absurdum* of its own opening sentence. “People have rights. Here are the necessary conditions for *any* rights to exist. These conditions have—obviously—never been met. Therefore, no-one has ever owned anything (including themselves).”⁴

To illustrate the difficulties facing libertarianism in a broken world, consider the proviso that Nozick borrows from Locke—

³ R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

⁴ T. Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World*, 22-23.

where any initial acquisition of property is legitimate only if it leaves ‘enough and as good for others’. Nozick reinterprets Locke so that any system of property rules must leave everyone better-off than they would have been in the absence of any property rules.⁵ If ‘everyone’ includes future people—and how could it not?—then a *broken* future spells chaos for Nozick’s proviso. No property system that leads to the destruction of favourable conditions could possibly leave everyone better-off than they would otherwise have been. Indeed, even if the future were rosy, it is still vanishingly unlikely that any property rules remotely similar to Nozick’s would leave everyone (including *each* future person) no-worse-off. Once we factor in future people, Nozick’s conditions of just acquisition seem impossible to meet. But, if nothing has ever been justly acquired, then no-one has ever owned anything.

Part One ends with a discussion of nationalism. To provide a stark contrast with the contemporary world, I stipulate that national boundaries have collapsed in the broken future. I then ask how future philosophers might interpret present attempts to justify national entitlements.

Part Two covers the central topics in contemporary utilitarianism: act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, theories of well-being, and the connection between liberty and utility (exemplified by J. S. Mill). It also includes a chapter on obligations to future people, focusing especially on Derek Parfit’s seminal *Reasons and Persons*.⁶ While this topic is not always covered in introductory ethics classes, it has been the subject of considerable recent debate. And one theme of the book is that future people, living with the consequences of our failure to

⁵ R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 174-182.

⁶ D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

protect their interests, will take intergenerational obligations much more seriously than we do.

A theme of Part Two is that, although utilitarianism has the flexibility to adapt itself to new circumstances, affluent utilitarian defences of liberty and moderation will be hard to sustain in a broken future. Utilitarians may be forced to choose between their utilitarianism and their liberal moderation.

Part Three begins with the founders of social contract theory—Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The future philosophy teacher suggests that, in a broken world, these pre-affluent thinkers may seem more relevant than their more affluent successors. The central focus is on Rawls, who is the most significant recent contract theorist. Following the pattern of Part Two, Part Three includes a separate chapter on Rawlsian intergenerational justice. Rawls is explicit that his liberal theory of justice applies only under favourable conditions. Survival bottlenecks and survival lotteries have no place in Rawls's justice as fairness. However, the final chapter in Part Three explores several ways that a suitably modified liberal contract-based theory could make sense in a broken world.

The book concludes with two brief chapters on democracy. Most contemporary political philosophers (apart from libertarians) assume that democracy is the best way to resolve political disagreements. To interrogate this presumption, I stipulate that broken world societies are not democratic, and that their inhabitants are suspicious of democracy precisely because it lead to their broken world. Part Four thus asks whether affluent arguments for democracy are strong enough to persuade a sceptical outsider, especially one committed to intergenerational justice.

III

General Themes of The Book

Several overarching themes emerge from the future teacher's survey of affluent philosophy. First, some central affluent moral concepts are very hard to translate to the broken world. The most obvious is our affluent notion of *rights*. Rights are not much use if you cannot stay alive. We are rightly suspicious that the rights of the rich will trump the needs of the poor. So many rights theorists defend rights to subsistence, to have your basic needs met, to be provided with a decent standard of living, or basic education, or adequate health care, and so on. But in a broken world, we cannot meet all basic needs. So we cannot honour all these positive rights. And basic needs also inevitably conflict with other rights. In a broken world, *any* inefficiency in food production leads to starvation, as does *any* diversion of economic activity to produce luxuries rather than necessities. A broken world may require restrictions on personal liberty on a scale that people have only previously accepted in times of war, or other temporary crisis. Private land might be requisitioned to grow food, as might individual labour; the use of fossil fuels for private purposes might be severely curtailed; and individual lifestyle choices—especially reproductive decisions—might be much more tightly regulated and constrained.

A related theme is that the liberalism and moderation characteristic of much affluent philosophy is hard to defend in a broken world. This is most obvious in Part Two, where the broken world students interrogate the moderate liberal utilitarian tradition of J. S. Mill. But moderate forms of libertarianism, nationalism, and contractualism face similar difficulties. Foundational moral theories that yield comfortable results in an affluent world can become extreme and illiberal in a broken one.

Finally, when it comes to intergenerational justice itself, the book suggests that all affluent theories rely, in different ways, on the complacent assumption that obligations to future people can be ignored because future people will be better-off than present people. Once this presumption is removed, intergenerational issues become both much more urgent, and much harder to address.

University of St Andrews

&

The University of Auckland

If you need to cite this article, please use the following format:

Mulgan, Tim, "A précis to *Ethics for a Broken World*," *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2014), 3-10, edited by S. Maffettone, G. Pellegrino and M. Bocchiola