"The Poor Will Never Cease": Theological Textual Configurations of Time, Responsibility and Justice

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Abstract. Theological ethics, particularly Christian theological ethics, is very well-equipped both to treat the interests and needs of future generations as a genuine and pressing concern – and also to evade some of the questions they pose about temporality, by appealing to judgement beyond history. Phenomenological approaches to the question of future generations are important as a counterbalance to this tendency in theological ethics, insofar as they force us to remain with, and wrestle with, the relation to future persons *as future*. In this article I show that drawing on phenomenological approaches, in order to attend to temporality, produces an account of justice and responsibility to future generations that is more adequate theologically, as well as ethically. Attending to how the other, the future and the imperative of justice interrelate yields an approach to theological ethics that does not need to assume *for the ethicist* the God's-eye view – the view from outside time, narrative or interpersonal encounter – and that is thus able to grapple with the core questions raised by bringing future generations into ethics.

Keywords. Intergenerational Responsibility; Poverty; Levinas; Arendt; Deuteronomy 15.

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1. Introduction

How does attention to future generations reshape ethical thought? It might seem obvious that thinking about future generations brings temporality and otherness into the centre of ethics. At the very least, thinking about future generations should force us to notice and reconsider unspoken assumptions, in our understandings of justice and responsibility, about the presence, the availability to thought, or the agency, of ethical subjects. However, in practice several of the most influential treatments of the subject avoid this reconsideration. Some attempt to integrate future generations into existing patterns of ethical or economic calculus by spatializing the temporal difference between ourselves and future generations, for example by processes of discounting or by treating future generations as «distant strangers».[1] Others seek to bring all generations into a shared ethical space and to deny temporal gaps between them for the purposes of justice – and yet others, albeit controversially, question the coherence of talking about «future persons» as ethical subjects at all.[2]

Theological ethics, particularly Christian theological ethics – as I have argued elsewhere – is distinctively well-equipped both to treat the interests and needs of future generations as a genuine and pressing concern, and to evade some of the questions they pose about temporality. The idea of judgement beyond history – of an eschatological summing-up of history that includes all generations, of the truth about human action being revealed *sub specie aeternitatis* in the divine vision that holds past, present and future together– creates, it has been argued, an obvious imperative to consider future generations as fellow members of the human community. Certainly it puts a check on the inclination to focus exclusively on the needs and

1 For a (relatively) recent discussion of the ethical issues around discounting in relation to climate change, see ROEMER 2011 and the rejoinder in DASGUPTA 2011. On future generations as «distant strangers», see O'NEILL 1994.

2 The most famous example of the former is John Rawls' abolition of generational separation behind the 'veil of ignorance' – RAWLS 1971, 284-90 and 587. The most famous example of the latter is PARFIT 1982.

interests of the present. However, it also invites the ethicist or theologian herself to adopt the viewpoint 'from eternity' – and hence to fail to reckon with the futurity of future generations.[3]

Phenomenological approaches to the question of future generations are important as a counterbalance to this tendency in theological ethics, insofar as they force us to remain with, and wrestle with, the relation to future persons *as future*. As I seek to demonstrate in what follows, this does not in turn mean that theological and phenomenological approaches to future generations are inherently opposed. On the contrary, thinking carefully about temporality produces an account of justice and responsibility to future generations that is more adequate theologically, as well as ethically; and this becomes particularly clear when we bring questions about temporality and otherness to the reading of scriptural texts. Attending to how the other, the future and the imperative of justice interrelate yields an approach to theological ethics that does not need to assume *for the ethicist* the God's-eye view – the view from outside time, narrative or interpersonal encounter – and that is thus able to grapple with the core questions raised by bringing future generations into ethics.[4]

2. The Neighbour and the Future: Poverty and Time in a Troubling Text

My focus in this article is a well-known and widely-used text from the Hebrew Bible[5] on poverty and need, together with its quotation and

3 I discuss this at more length in MUERS 2008, 17-30.

4 In integrating philosophical, theological and textual approaches I take an approach similar to that of Robert Gibbs, Claire Elise Katz, and others who read Lévinas (for example) as a reinterpreter of texts as well as a re-former of phenomenology – and who draw out the philosophical significance of his text-based writings. GIBBS 1994; KATZ 2003. My method for working with scriptural texts is strongly influenced by 'scriptural reasoning' as it has developed in relation to postmodern Jewish philosophy and postliberal Christian theology; see on this FORD AND PECKNOLD 2006.

5 Which I discuss here both as TaNaKh and as Old Testament – that is, as it is read as Jewish and as Christian scripture.

reinterpretation in the New Testament. The core phrase, given at the beginning of this article, is from Deuteronomy 15:11 and Matthew 26:11– given here both in the forms in which it has most often been quoted in English and in the translation now favoured for English-language academic use.

> …the poor will never cease from out of the land / the poor ye have always with you (King James Version) [6]
> …there will never cease to be some in need on the earth / you always have the poor with you (New Revised Standard Version)

While being taken as a key text for the overall shape of ethics (by both Jewish and Christian interpreters), Deuteronomy 15:11 has been subject to frequent ideological reappropriation. In Western Christian contexts – particularly Britain and North America – it has shaped economics and welfare policies, as well as individual morality. It is not, at first glance, a text about future generations; but by its invocation of an indefinite future, in the context (as we shall see later) of a summons to responsibility and to acts of justice, it raises sharp issues about temporality in relation to ethics. I have argued elsewhere that concern for future generations is not a sub-topic within ethics that can be treated according to principles already established, but rather a stance that affects the way in which *all* ethics is done.[7] It is from that starting-point that, in this article, I re-examine texts about poverty, need and justice – first to understand what this stance of concern for future generations might look like, and second to understand how that stance affects approaches to poverty and need.

I note, to begin with, that when this text was and is cited in relation to welfare policies and wealth inequality, its orientation to time plays an important and often negative role. To give a representative example

6 'The poor will never cease from out of the land' is the King James Version translation of Deuteronomy 15:11; the equivalent verse in the New Testament, Matthew 26:11 and parallels, is 'ye have the poor always with you'.

7 Muers 2008; see also Muers 2004.

– when used by Rick Perry to claim divine sanction for downplaying the role of government in reducing poverty, it evokes a stable order of society to counter dangerous suggestions that progress might be possible or desirable.

> *[Rick Perry]* was asked about the growing gap between rich and poor in Texas…
> "Biblically, the poor are always going to be with us in some form or fashion," he said…
> Perry acknowledged that the richest Texans have experienced the greatest amount of earnings growth, but dismissed the notion that income inequality is a problem in the state, saying, "We don't grapple with that here".[8]

For Perry the main enactment of responsibility to future generations, as justified and mandated by scriptural texts like Deuteronomy 15:11/Matthew 26:11, is maintaining things as they are – and keeping a check on any attempt to alter the present order that keeps all generations in the same eternally-mandated moral situation. In another time and place, when «the poor will never cease from out of the land» was inscribed on the foundation stone of a workhouse in Victorian England,[9] it spatialized and sequestered «the poor» as an enduring if troubling feature of the social landscape – for whom enduring institutionalised provision would need to be made. In the context of the Malthusian economics that still dominated attitudes to poverty in the wake of the 1842 poor law reform, it also named the perceived threat of increasing population, of intergenerational «pauperism»- and of the failure of poverty to perform its proper function as a spur to thrift, hard work and progress.

Both of these illustrative examples use Deuteronomy 15:11, or its near-repetition in Matthew 26:11, to ground or support an overview –

8 DRUCKER 2014.

9 The Woolwich Union workhouse in London, founded in 1870; see London Metropolitan Archives, n.d.

we might say, a God's-eye view, a view from beyond intergenerational succession - of the meaning of poverty within history. Both pull the text out of any narrative context in order to let it stand as a general statement of the configuration of human affairs – on the basis of which deductions can be made about appropriate large-scale responses that will either maintain the status quo for future generations, or secure rationally-directed progress.

As critical commentators have noted, however, to re-contextualise the quotation – particularly in Deuteronomy 15 – complicates the picture considerably.[10] My argument in what follows is that this recontextualisation, by restoring questions of temporality and alterity to the conversation about poverty and justice, opens up a conversation about justice to future generations.

> [1]Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. [2]And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed. [3]Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. [4]There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, [5]if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. [6]When the LORD your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.
>
> [7]If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your

10 See BRUEGGEMANN 2001, 169: «By itself that statement has been misread to sustain indifference toward the poor because nothing can be done about poverty anyway. Nothing could be more remote from this text, however, than passive indifference…»

> community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. [8]You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. [9]Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near", and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. [10]Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.[11] Since *there will never cease to be some in need on the earth*, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land". (Deuteronomy 15:1-11)

Critics of the use of Deuteronomy 15:11 to justify laissez-faire economics – or even the refusal of large-scale charity – have tended to point first to the imperative associated with the indicative statement in verse 11; there will never cease to be some in need, *therefore* open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour.[11] This move on its own, however, does not capture the temporal structure of the text; in fact it tends to replace a timeless indicative (there will never cease to be some in need) with a timeless imperative (open your hand to the poor). More important, for our purposes at least, is the wider context. The whole discussion of the needy neighbour, with the repeated command to 'open your hand' is necessary because of the approach of the year of remission, when (throughout the history of interpretation, notwithstanding certain ambiguities in the text itself) all debts are to be cancelled.[12] The crucial claim – that there «will never cease to be some in need on the earth»– is set in the context of a particular urgent

11 See for example the discussion in BEAVIS 2011, 210.

12 A recent discussion of the historical question of debt suspension and debt cancellation in the 'year of remission' is in WAFAWANAKA 2014.

present need *and* an imminent future transformation. What looks out of context like a de-temporalised commentary on the background conditions of justice in general – there will always be «some in need», and we will need to set out general principles according to which they can be helped – looks, when read in context, more like a specific proposal about how to read the situation *now* in the light of what is coming.

The key problem addressed by the text is that a loan to the needy neighbour just before the year of debt-cancellation is, in fact, an irrecoverable gift, because it will never be paid back. Indeed, this transformation is effected in the text as the «loan» in verse 8 becomes a «gift» in verse 9. Given the impending year of remission, the lender/giver in this situation retains no control over what the borrower/recipient does with the loan, and no predictable bond of reciprocity is established. The loan before the year of debt-cancellation escapes the ordinary calculus of rights and responsibilities – debts – based on the symmetrical and simultaneous involvement of the parties. As we shall see, this shift from loan to gift – from reciprocal obligation to non-returnable donation – in the scenario and in the text provides the way in to a reading that places future generations in the centre of the text.

Consider, first, how the loan immediately before the year of remission – the loan that escapes or exceeds reciprocity, the loan that becomes a gift – suggests profound vulnerability, not only for the person who needs it but for the person from whom it is requested. With the year of remission approaching, so without a framework of reciprocal obligations to secure the loan, the lender has – it would seem – no reliable calculus, in terms of likely future benefits, by which to make a decision about whether, what and how much to lend. It is hardly surprising, as several commentators note, that the text envisages reluctance to comply, and brings in a range of possible motivations. The loan/gift is to be made in order to secure a blessing from the LORD (15:10), or in order not to incur guilt (15:9), or because the needy person is kindred (15:7, «a member of your community»), or

– as our core quotation suggests – because of shared and ongoing vulnerability, the ongoing threat of poverty, that might bring the one who now holds wealth into the position of the needy person.

There is an obvious parallel with the struggle, in the literature on ethics, to find new and distinctive motivations for concern for future generations – when the utilitarian calculus cannot operate reliably, and the future person is not present to assert rights or express preferences. Sometimes even in the 'secular' literature this search for motivation (for caring about future generations) is assigned to the theological sphere. [13]

The ordinary rules governing interpersonal obligation hit a limit at the temporal break – the year of remission, and the break between generations. The needy neighbour, like the future person, clearly exercises agency after the year of remission, that is, beyond the divide that makes the repayment of debt impossible; but the lender/giver before the year of remission sees nothing of it and takes nothing back from it. The irresolvable asymmetry created by this temporal gap – the coming year of remission – is, as can also be the case with future generations, counterbalanced by the acknowledgement both of material connection and of similarity. The needy neighbour is kindred; s/he inhabits the same space both culturally and socially (in the town) and ecologically (in the land). In the same way, future generations can be called into ethical discussion as people *like us* - with at least some broadly predictable needs and desires – and as people *linked to us* by generational succession. Moreover and more fundamentally, the neighbour in Deuteronomy is capable of appearing within existing structures of reciprocity and mutual obligation, of making a request or bringing a need – even though that request or need pushes beyond the boundaries of what can be thought or understood within the system. In the same way, responsibility to future generations can be envisaged, represented or spoken for, and can arise as an ethical question, even though it might be at the limits of ethics.

Verse 11, on this reading, draws attention to the continued

13 See the discussion of this in Muers 2004.

succession of generations and the repeated need for non-reciprocal giving. «There will never cease to be some in need»; the year of remission, like the 'problem of generations', itself establishes a pattern – a larger pattern of paying forward, loans-converted-to-gifts, the writing off of unfinished business, as an integral part of what it is to inhabit the land. At first glance, the possibility of establishing this pattern is predicated, in Deuteronomy, on a bounded community and the perpetuation of a pattern of life. The writing off of debts applies to neighbours and fellow-citizens, and specifically not to foreigners. The loan to the needy neighbour is characterised as a loan in the first place – and not immediately converted, textually, into a gift, even though that is what it will become. A system of loans, of reciprocal obligations, is re-inscribed even as it is about to stop making sense; and it re-emerges on the other side of the year of remission, with the next generation, the latest recipient of a non-returnable gift, able to pick up where the previous one left off.

If we follow this line of thought, it looks as if it might be possible to locate the ethical importance of future generations in the continuing existence of a particular community – including a particular community's ordinary ethical practices. Justice to future generations then becomes a matter of giving future generations what they need in order to establish or maintain a system of justice; a kind of 'meta-justice', preserving institutions, memories, texts, and laws, the institutional and social ecology as well as the physical ecology of the land. This recognition of continuity – of the social and cultural as well as physical connections between generations, which mean that intergenerational relations cannot be reduced simply to a division of resources – is an important component of any response to the 'problem of generations'. On its own, however, the mere assertion that future generations are owed *some* account of justice or some way of establishing responsibility does not say enough. It does not allow for the disruptive and excessive character of the relation to future generations – the surrender of control over the unrepeatable and unreturnable gift. To use Derrida's terms, an emphasis on

intergenerational community prioritises the *xenia*, the lineage and the sustained chain of inheritance, and loses sight of the ways in which the future person can also be *xenos*, the stranger/foreigner.[14]

If we think about the loan-gift in terms of the surrender of control to or over the future, the resistance to the command anticipated by the text – «do not be hard-hearted… be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought» – can from this perspective be linked to the fear of death. One response to the fear of death – either in this text or certain ethical accounts of future generations – might be found in the decision to secure the future of one's community, to live on through one's children. Another, however, might be found in a basic reorientation of the self towards the other. Within our text, this response is hinted at in the repeated excessive demand that the gift to the needy neighbour – the gift that points towards the future – must be willing and unconstrained as well as materially unlimited. The loan/gift is supposed to be made, not only to an unlimited amount – «enough to meet the need, whatever it may be» – but willingly and without a «mean thought». Not only refusal, but even hesitation or the bearing of a grudge, incurs guilt (15:9). Not only the specificity of individual need and the individual's situation, but also the deep formation of the giver's character, enter the picture in disorienting ways. Hostility, meanness and hard-heartedness struggle against liberality and open-handedness; dispassionate and calculating judgement is, the text suggests, impossible. Over against a putative claim to have accurately assessed the need of the other and given exactly the right amount, no more and no less, the text sets a further demand for self-surrender – give liberally and be ungrudging, hold nothing back. This excess in the text resists the straightforward re-incorporation of justice to future generations into a restatement of the value of a current system of justice.

14 DERRIDA 2000, 29.

3. Faces of the Future: Rereading with Lévinas

As Claire Elise Katz acknowledges when she takes Deuteronomy 15:8-9 as the epigraph for a chapter on Lévinas, this summons to infinite or unbounded responsibility before the face of the needy other is taken up in Lévinas' ethics as first philosophy.[15] In fact, one of his early Talmudic discussions Lévinas addresses directly the question of the temporality of Deuteronomy 15.[16] With reference to an argument in the Talmud about the messianic age, he briefly considers the claim that of verse 11 «there will never cease to be some in need» in relation to the contradictory claim, in verse 4, that there will be *nobody* in need. In Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Shmuel argues that the only difference between the messianic age and the present time will be the end of political oppression.[17] What this implies is that poverty will continue; the presumed basis for this claim is Deuteronomy 15:11 taken in combination with Deuteronomy 15:6 («you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you»). Lévinas, reasonably enough, argues that that the rabbi must be aware of verse 4 and the promise that there will be nobody in need; and moreover, it seems perverse to suggest that there will be poverty after the coming of the messiah. How, then, is it possible to make sense of the insistence that poverty continues indefinitely? Lévinas' response takes us to the heart of his «ethics as first philosophy». Poverty continues, according to Lévinas, not as a sign of continuing economic injustice, but as the otherness of the other person before whom I am responsible, to whom I am summoned to give, and in relation to whom my spiritual life is possible – the poverty in the face of the other.[18]

As Terry Veling notes, Lévinas' insistence that ethical responsibility is inescapable, that there is a perpetual duty of vigilance, spurs a

15 Katz 2003, 55.

16 Lévinas' reading is discussed in Morgan 2016, 243-7. The reading itself is Lévinas 1990, 59-97.

17 *Babylonian Talmud* Sanhedrin 99a.

18 On the 'essential poverty' in the face, see Lévinas 1985, 86.

reading of Deuteronomy 15:11 in terms of inexhaustible and inescapable responsibility – with no end in sight, because to bring an end into sight would be to relativise the other in relation to some end.[19] What is particularly striking for our purposes is the idea that poverty or need persists into the future, and not merely the pessimistically-foreseeable future but the hoped-for future, the messianic age. More precisely, what persists is not poverty as a condition suffered by (some) individuals or groups (and not others), but rather *the other's need* as the point of origin of the responsible self. Relationships of need continue because otherwise there is no possibility of transcendence, no real future.

The Lévinassian interpretation appears to contrast with the reading of this text offered by Walter Brueggemann in a recent theological commentary, which treats Deuteronomy 15 as the linchpin of a «covenant economics» founded on divine generosity. For Brueggemann, verse 4 promises the elimination of poverty – a successful «war on poverty» – as a result of the practice of debt cancellation and generous giving in response to need. The text as a whole calls for social solidarity, bridging the gap between the relatively secure and the relatively vulnerable through the assurance of collective blessing and the presence of YHWH as mediator and judge (taking the «cry» of the needy person as a quasi-judicial term).[20] The long-term consequence of following this radical economic model, Brueggemann argues – here both following the logic of the text *and* appealing to his readers' political imaginations – would indeed be the end of poverty. Brueggemann uses Deuteronomy 15 to set out a radical alternative vision of economics, grounded in divine generosity rather than the fear of scarcity – by implication, intergenerationally sustainable in a way that the present order is not, but also a vision of what the future ought to be.

The contrast need not be an insuperable conflict. Reading Brueggemann's evocation of a successful «war on poverty» in the

19 VELING 2014, 37-8.

20 BRUEGGEMANN 2001, 162-70.

context of Lévinas' work grounds this vision and the restless action it generates – for an end to poverty, for the meeting of all needs – in the specific fact of being made responsible, being subjected to the call of the other. It disturbs the general historical problem of «some in need» with the specific and unsubstitutable presence of the needy neighbour. Without this unsubstitutable presence, what we have is a totalising programme of action – a total war on poverty – in which the subject is never obliged to attend to the other and never deals with the question of futurity.

This juxtaposition brings us to one of the key problems with an attempt to make links between responsibility to the needy neighbour and responsibility to future generations. Reference to Lévinas reminds us that the needy person in Deuteronomy 15 has what the future person does *not* have – a face that we encounter; and referring to Katz and feminist commentators on Lévinas reminds us that the future person also does not have a specific embodied presence. The fact that the encounter with the needy other calls forth open-handed and open-ended giving – 'enough to meet the need, whatever it may be' – has as its corollary the fact that there is, in each case, *some specific need* to be discerned and met, some particular body to be cared for, some exercise of judgement and measurement in order to give «enough». The problem with turning the future person into a needy neighbour is that the case-by-case judgement about what counts as «enough» – which seems to be integral to the kind of justice and responsibility called forth by Deuteronomy 15 – is impossible in relation to future generations. So, for that matter, is the embodied practice of generosity, the opening of the hand and the heart, which seems in turn to be integral to judgements about what is required. I cannot *pay attention* to the future person in his or her specificity. The temptation is either to project an exact image of myself into the future, or to assume that I can know nothing at all about future generations. It is not surprising in this context that justice and responsibility to future generations easily becomes a matter of numbers and aggregates – or becomes fraught with impossibility.

Attempts to project overall future needs, and to plan for them, do tell us something important about responsibility to future generations. They recognise common human embodiment and a shared environment – the recurrence of basic human needs and the perdurance of «the land» («there will never cease to be some in need on the earth»). The worry, from the point of view of ethics, is that a calculating focus on the future does not merely sideline, but actively works against, the primary summons to responsibility in the face of the other. Open-handed attentiveness is not merely postponed but rendered impossible, because it always has to be subjected to the calculus of future costs and benefits. The 'facelessness' of future generations tends to reinforce an approach to ethics that de-emphasises attention both to specific unsubstitutable persons and to human difference.

Christian uses of Deuteronomy 15:11 – like those quoted earlier in this article, from Rick Perry and from the Woolwich workhouse – are particularly prone to 'faceless' readings that deal with poverty in general, with predictable futures and with contextless conclusions. The quotation of Deuteronomy 15:11 that appears in the New Testament (Matthew 26:11 and parallels) places it, out of context, on the lips of Jesus – in a passage widely recognised in interpretive tradition as problematic for proponents of Christian charity. A woman anoints Jesus with valuable ointment; Jesus' disciples (or unspecified onlookers) criticise her action and suggest that the money should have been given to the poor; and Jesus responds:

> Why do you trouble this woman? She has performed a good service for me. [11]For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me…

One of the effects of this recontextualisation is to detach the indicative statement about the ongoing existence of poverty – poverty carries on indefinitely – both from a specific temporal, social and legal framework (the year of remission) and from the immediate

confrontation with the needy neighbour in which ethical responsibility arises. In the New Testament story there is, of course, excessive generosity and open-handedness, an unreturnable gift and care for embodied particularity; it is displayed by the woman who anoints Jesus. She, however, is rarely, in the interpretive tradition on this particular text, linked with «the poor» or considered as their representative. This in turn means that the unrepeatable particular act of generosity becomes a one-off already safely consigned to the past, rather than a continuing foundation for ethical responsibility. Disruptive encounters and demands are sequestered off from the space of ordinary ethics.

The woman's action in anointing Jesus – and *not* giving money to the poor – is, for the tradition of interpretation, an exceptional response to an unrepeatable situation. It needs to be read in this way in order not to derail the numerous injunctions to charity and almsgiving within the New Testament. Indeed, there are interpretations in Christian tradition that, rather on the lines suggested by Lévinas, read poverty as relational and draw an imperative from the claim that the poor are always *with you*. The saying of Jesus, says Calvin, is intended to direct its hearers' attention to the poor in order to spur charitable giving, to teach them to interpret poverty as a call on charity (rather than, let us say, as either a punishment or a praiseworthy spiritual trial for the person who endures it).[21] Most importantly for our purposes, however, once Deuteronomy 15:11 has been taken out of its earlier textual context, separated from any possible disruptive influence from its New Testament context, *and* invested with specific authority by being placed on the lips of Jesus, it gains a new kind of power to speak and shape the future. «You will always have the poor with you» can now serve a theodicy, a justification of ongoing need and suffering as part of a divine plan within history - and hence also, potentially, an injunction *against* open-handed generosity.

Malthus' *Essay on the Principles of Population*, famous or infamous at the origins of political economy, criticises those who give too liberally

21 Calvin 1995 [1555], 123.

or open-handedly to the poor, precisely because they perpetuate the dynamics that make poverty worse in every generation. As Malthus describes it, to give to the needy just because they are needy, in the full expectation that there will always be need and with no expectation of return, is the precise opposite of what the laws of population suggest as the prudent course of action. Poverty or need, in Malthus' curious theodicy,[22] is not a relational condition calling forth an ethical response from others; it is a self-referential condition spurring the sufferer on to greater efforts of industry and thrift. Poverty, or (more generally) scarcity as a feature of the natural world, does enable human self-transcendence over time – through the progressive transformation and colonisation of the natural world, and the growth of innovation and creativity; but it does this only if there is *no* liberal and open-handed encounter with the needy neighbour. Generosity, from this perspective, perpetuates and worsens the wrongs of the present – and this is in part *because* it recognises poverty or need as a relational condition, a call to responsibility, rather than as a deficit in the individual.

It is important to note that Malthusian political economy, with its built-in explanation of how God could decree the continuance of poverty and its systemic repudiation of face-to-face generosity, was used not to maintain the status quo but to advocate a programme of radical reform. Patterns of political and economic reasoning that project the present forwards – without interrogating the assumptions and values on which the present is based – do enable a practice of 'responsibility to future generations', very often at the expense of those members of present generations who do not fit in. Sacrificing real others in the present for the sake of a glorious future can easily be made to look like the only responsible course of action. It can look very irresponsible towards future generations to lend to the needy neighbour, as much as he or she needs, without any way of controlling what he or she does next.

How do we shape ethical thinking about the future that takes

22 On Malthus' theodicy, see SANTURRI 1982.

account of material, social and institutional continuity – the fact that future persons inherit from us and inhabit the same land – while also heeding the disruptive or excessive call to responsibility, the demand for open-handed and open-hearted response to the particular other? In a final section, in dialogue with Hannah Arendt, I propose a way of mediating these concerns – still through attention to the reading of Deuteronomy 15.

4. New Beginnings in Thinking: Rereading with Arendt

In the final chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt traces the contours of totalitarian control, first in the inexorable logic of ideologies, and second in the experience of loneliness. [23] At the centre of her account of loneliness is Luther's arresting reflection (both autobiographical and theological) on the «heart turned in on itself» – the isolated self that refers only to itself and thinks only of itself. In what Arendt notes as a «little-known remark» – but one that is fully consonant with his wider project – Luther says that a lonely person «always deduces one thing from another and thinks everything to the worst».[24] Totalitarian extremism, Arendt argues, follows from the production of loneliness – the production of circumstances in which the only option is to think an ideology through to its logical conclusions, without regard to their implications or effects in the world. The self under totalitarianism is cut off from all possibility of thinking from the standpoint of another and hence of interrupting the inexorable logic of ideology.

Arendt's transposition of this experience of loneliness into the political sphere invites its application to the different ways in which the collective human future is envisioned and imagined – the ways in which conclusions about the future are drawn and enacted from a

23 Arendt 1976, 474-9.
24 Arendt 1976, 477.

present starting-point. The inexorable reasoning behind the laws of population, in Malthus and the Malthusians, produced both a compelling expectation of «the worst» in the human future and – again as Arendt suggests is the tendency of ideology allied to power – the practices that made that pessimistic vision a reality. To write «the poor you have always with you» over the doors of the workhouse was simultaneously to state the conclusion to an argument, to forecast the condition of future generations, and (wittingly or unwittingly) to draw attention to a policy that made that forecast more likely to come true. The inexorability of ideology becomes the inexorability of a future that continues, and projects forward, the dynamics and systems of the present – and justifies the actions that perpetuate them. To quote the title of another of Arendt's works, without the possibility of thinking from the standpoint of another – without the plural public space to form conscience and consciousness – there is no space «between past and future»; the movement from the one to the other is inexorable.[25]

Over against totalitarianism's inexorable logics and the loneliness of the totalitarian subject, Arendt musters two key sources of resistance - the capacity to think, and the capacity to make or be a beginning. As her corpus makes clear, these are intrinsically social and political capacities. The inability to think is the inability to think *from the standpoint of another*; the significance of natality, the beginning that each human being is and makes, is the capacity to act in the political sphere. The isolated subject of totalitarianism cannot entertain or admit a new beginning, either in thought or in reality – and cannot admit a future that is not entirely bound by the past. In Lévinassian terms, he or she cannot recognise the poverty of the face and the responsibility that it implies; and, beyond this, he or she cannot enter into the process of 'open-hearted' reasoning and discernment that would enable a proper response to the other.

The emphasis in Arendt on *thinking* from the standpoint of another shifts the discussion of justice and responsibility to future generations into the sphere of the political. It encourages us to ask in Deuteronomy

25 Arendt 2006.

15 – and similar texts – about the content of the needy neighbour's «cry to the LORD» (Deuteronomy 15:9). Is it simply a cry of inarticulate need that interrupts the chain of reasoning? If, as Walter Brueggemann suggests, it is more like a legal deposition, we might be able to understand it not only as 'otherness' but other *thought*. It is the beginning of a new sequence of reasoning, or the inauguration of a new public hearing.

Reading with Arendt in this way, open-heartedness becomes the opposite, not only of material selfishness, but of the heart and mind turned in on itself – the single chain of reasoning indefinitely projected into the future (no matter what the facts are). Open-heartedness is willingness to *reason* from the standpoint of another, not only to jump to attention when another cries out. Thinking with Arendt allows us to recognise how easy it is for talk about the suffering of helpless others, or about our duty to future generations, to be appropriated for totalitarian purposes.

It should be noted, furthermore, that in Deuteronomy 15 the cry of the other can cause its subject – the one addressed by the commandment and made responsible – to incur guilt (15:9). One little-discussed aspect of responsibility to future generations is the subjection of present actions to future judgement; history, it is said, will be our judge. This subjection to future judgement can, of course, be thought about in a way that re-performs the totalitarian logic of inexorability – if we fail adequately to live up to the standards set by the ideology, we will in due course incur guilt at the bar of the entirely foreseeable future. Reading with Arendt, however, produces a more hopeful – although also far less controllable – account of the judgements and reasonings of future generations, one that takes account of the possibility of political and ethical change and of new beginnings in political life. Future generations may «cry out», bring charges against us and make judgements about guilt according to modes of reasoning and understanding that we do not yet know about. Indeed, reading with Deuteronomy 15 and reading with Arendt on totalitarianism, the cry of the neighbour – the outburst of resistant

and critical thinking – can emerge *despite* and *in the face of* persistent hard-heartedness and tight-fistedness.

What, finally, do any of these readings say about the work of theology in thinking responsibility to future generations? As we have seen, there is a straightforward and rather well-trodden path, particularly in the age of modern ideologies, to making God the guarantor of a continuing state of affairs, projecting current dominant reasonings about poverty, wealth, debt, and so forth, indefinitely into the future. In an example of this, we have seen that Deuteronomy 15:11 can be pulled out of its context – particularly via its New Testament recontextualisation – as a divine statement of inevitability, the unarguable starting-point for a chain of reasoning and action that treats both future generations and poverty as predictable and controllable phenomena. Treated as an authoritative statement about the created order, it may require – and find – a theodicy in order to quell any doubts or concerns, but it does not admit or invite the attempt to think from the standpoint of another. When the text is read back into context, however, I suggest that the appeal to divine authority grounds, not the continuation of present conditions, but the cry of the other –the possibility of a beginning and the inception of thinking. [26]

26 Even in the New Testament recontextualisation of Deuteronomy 15:11, the action of the woman who anoints Jesus makes a beginning – not only by being singular and unrepeatable, nor by being a minor aberration in an otherwise consistent set of events, but by being remembered, represented and reasoned about (her story is told «wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world», «in remembrance of her», Matthew 26:13). Any account of how and why the poor are «always with you» will have to reckon with the standpoint of another.

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