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## Reflections on The Good Ancestor

'There are many suns ... each day has its own. Some are small, some are big. I'm named after the small ones.' (Mda 2015: 23)

### The argument in short:

Roman Krznaric's *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World* (2020) is about developing an argument for long-term thinking. In Part 1 he takes up a question posed by Jonas Salk, who was part of the team who developed the first safe polio vaccine, namely 'Are we being good ancestors?' (v, 3) in a more active form, 'How can we be good ancestors?' (4). He observes that the future has been 'colonised' (4) by short-term thinking and calls for it to be 'decolonised' (241). Albeit in the background, his argument rests on the rise of Western modernity as the coloniser of how we engage with time, the future and generations to come. Krznaric is convinced that there has been an 'unprecedented' 'growing public belief' (8) in long-term thinking over the past 25 years in terms of a number of concrete projects, but that there is an 'intellectual vacuum', even a 'conceptual emergency' in as far as the conceptual development of the term goes. His focus is addressed to this vacuum/emergency by tackling ideas, in particular, to reflect on the question of 'how do we make a personal, empathic connection with future generations whom we can never meet and whose lives we can barely imagine? ... how do we empathize not just across space but across time?' (10).

The bulk of the argument rests on his identification of six drivers for short-termism and how they can be countered by long-term thinking. The former

consists of the tyranny of the clock; digital distraction; political presentism; speculative capitalism; network uncertainty; and perpetual progress (12). The ways in which these can be countered are organised in three clusters: Imagining the future, which is based in Deep-time Humility and developing a Transcendent Goal for Humanity; Caring about the Future, which asks for a Legacy Mindset and the commitment to Intergenerational Justice; and Planning for the Future, which requires Cathedral Thinking and Holistic Forecasting. For Krznaric, together with thinking 'fast and slow' as Daniel Kahneman has shown, we should realise that we also think short and long. The arguments rest on the capacity to think and to imagine and how to translate thought and the imagination into actions.

He draws on Terry Eagleton's distinction between optimism and hope: optimism being 'a cheery disposition to always look on the bright side of life' which 'can easily breed complacency and inaction'; hope being 'a more active and radical ideal that recognises the real possibility of failure, yet at the same time holds on to the prospect of success despite the odds, driven by a deep commitment to an outcome we value' (15). Turning to some neuroscience, Krznaric explains the different brain functions that connect with the difference between short-term and long-term thinking. The 'marshmallow brain' is the one that is focused on short-term desires and rewards; the 'acorn brain' helps to understand long-term goals (17). The acorn brain should be developed further, building on what has happened over the past two million years. Krznaric identifies wayfinding; the grandmother effect; social cooperation; and tool innovation, as ways developed by our ancestors to provide for the future. The bulk of the argument, the six ways to think long, is set out in Part 2 of the book. These are put up as 'a mental toolkit for becoming a good ancestor' by assisting in how to imagine, care about and plan both individually and collectively. In Part 3 the 'mental toolkit' is translated to practice within the realms of politics, economics and culture. The author focuses on work done by activists, organisers, academics, policymakers and students.

## Reflections

I started reading the book during a short visit to Cape Town, where like many times before I was struck by the quick turnaround of restaurants, cafés and shops in the city. This time I wondered about the extent to which this phenomenon is linked to the incapacity to think and plan long-term. I am not an economist, so my impulse is not to think about the lack of economic, or business planning but rather the extent to which the set-up and then failure of small enterprises is linked to a consumer culture responding to fads, to what is popular, fashionable and then, more importantly, leaving behind what is not. For anything to last, to sustain it needs to be around long enough in order to root, or make an imprint, some kind

of impression. To the extent that the book under discussion takes up questions of time and space, and in particular slow time, I find it of interest. The insistence on the urgency of thinking, of conceptual work to be done is one not heard often in a world in which functionalism and efficiency have become the mantra. Justice Oliver Wendel Holmes (1997: 1001), for example, was an important predecessor of what American Realism predicted many years ago that the 'man of the future is the man of statistics'. Holmes (1997: 992) famously described the 'bad man' as a good example of a person knowing only what is useful and not what is good. Holmes (1997: 1001) argued that the dragon, representing natural law or history or the concern with the good, ethics, morality, should be killed or tamed. Marianne Constable (1994), in a work on how legal theory has become socio-legal, has shown how the uptake of Holmes's bad man in the form of functionalism has resulted in the absence of any concern for justice in legal theory. Mark Antaki (2012) has shown how this kind of functionalism to a great extent has infiltrated the legal imagination with the result of even seemingly critical/ imaginary responses being thwarted by its own inability to think beyond a certain kind of functionalism and pragmatism. Krznaric's argument in the book in places unfortunately comes too close to this kind of functionalism for my own comfort. The writing falls into a kind of 'self-help' / 'how to' mode which compromises his own quest to address the conceptual vacuum/ crisis. One may note of course that the title of the book already reflects that impulse in emphasising the 'how to'. The argument would have been more convincing if it read less like a manual. As mentioned, in my view the self-help/ functionalist line almost thwarts the call for intellectual and conceptual work to be done.

The questions posed and the broad aim of the work are urgent. I find the emphasis on 'our interdependence with the living world and the need for reconciliation' suggestive. Hannah Arendt (1958), as someone who lamented the lack of thinking in the modern world and who dedicated her life's work to the importance of thinking and good judgment rejecting all forms of functionalism, underscored the importance to note the 'web of human relations'. For Arendt it is crucial that we reconcile ourselves with the world. Commentators have noted the centrality of reconciliation in her work on political action, but also in her understanding of history and judgment (Berkowitz 2011). According to George Kateb (1987: 165) Arendt regarded reconciliation as a response to world alienation: reconciling with the world is in a sense a counter to the strive-towards-perfection that entails not only a negation of plurality and temporariness but is also at the roots of totalitarianism. Reconciliation holds the potential of continuously creating a shared world in which plurality thrives. The possibility is of course also that one can't reconcile oneself with a certain kind of world which poses the opportunity to create new worlds (Berkowitz 2011). To ask if we are being good ancestors is

a way to engage directly with the world, to ask also if we are rightly sharing the world with others (also future inhabitants), to reflect on the question of can we reconcile ourselves with current ways and if not to think about different worlds.

Ideas on and practices of reconciliation, transformation and constitutionalism have been and still are at the centre of vehement critique in South African public discourse. In reflecting on the idea of long-term thinking as posed by Krznaric I wondered to what extent these ideas and practices could be regarded in the vein of long-term thinking that also comes with a certain slowness. Constitutionalism as quick fix is doomed to failure. And for me, also constitutionalism as functionalism, as a 'how to' response. Debates on the nature of the power that a constitution holds have sided for or against the idea that power is either constituted or constituent (Loughlin 2014: 218). One could argue that the power that a constitution holds is simultaneously constituted and constituent. The impulse might be there to declare once and for all, to constitute; however, the critical self-reflection, the urge to 'always begin again' as it were, to augment, change, re-design in the guise of the constituent is also present (Arendt 1963, Honig 1991). My sense is that the latter is a way of thinking that could hold space for future generations. Similarly, the notion of transformation could and maybe should be understood and practised as ongoing and therefore a long-term idea. If not, wouldn't it be a mere once-off response in the guise of replacement rather than deep change?

At the centre of the question, 'how to be good ancestors', I think is also to accept finitude, fragility and failure. This may seem counter-intuitive, but I want to suggest that to show a true concern for future generations we must come to terms with the extent to which our time on earth is temporary. A philosopher and thinker who dedicated a lot of time and thought on finitude is Jean-Luc Nancy who died in 2021 (Zerbib 2021). Other themes in his work, that relate to his view of finitude and which are also relevant to the issue of caring for the world for the sake of generations to come, are his understanding of freedom, community and meaning. Nancy (2000) emphasised the extent to which we are free only because we exist with others. Nancy's understanding of community relied on the idea of being in common without any notion of common being (1991). He believed that 'meaning' / 'sense' should not be understood by relating one thing with another. In this way he resisted a kind of functionality which accords mere mechanical value to meaning (Zerbib 2021). Bringing this back to my hesitance about Krznaric's book is the extent to which his argument hovers on the brink of becoming instrumental, a guide to long-term thinking.

Jonathan Franzen, already in 2019, called for all to accept climate change and to stop hoping for ways to stop it. We should hold on to hope but rethink what it means to hope, he argues. He observes that it is not only the far right's position

that is problematic but that also in progressive politics mention is made of ways to 'avert the catastrophe' or 'the language of stopping climate change' is invoked. Being truthful for him means that even though we will stop hoping to be saved we can make 'practical and ethical' arguments for example, for carbon reduction. Franzen brings the argument to the level of the everyday, smaller thinking. Small gestures even if not resulting in changing the climate on a grand scale can still have *meaning* which for me relates to Nancy's resistance to how meaning is perceived in terms of mechanical reference only – something is deemed to have meaning and to be meaningful only if it leads to an  $X + Y = Z$  kind of equation. Franzen interestingly notes how a 'false hope of salvation' can lead to a certain kind of complacency, for example if voting for a green party, or riding one's bicycle to work leaves one with a sense of doing what there is to be done. His support for the notion of rule of law and democracy that has the potential for continuous renewal and change can be understood in the vein of long-term thinking. For Franzen the struggle to secure civil society and justice can play an important part in climate action. He supports long-term thinking but notes that also some short-term hopes may be of value. 'It's fine to struggle against the constraints of human nature, hoping to mitigate the worst of what's to come, but it's just as important to fight smaller, more local battles ...' (2019). My sense is that this is not a call for short-term thinking as such but for modest action, for thinking on the level of the everyday, rather than grand narratives and worked out schemes to explain causes and raise responses.

Krznaric has brought pertinent issues to the forefront in an interesting manner. Identifying the pitfalls of short-term thinking to the extent that it leaves little room for ethical response and conceptual work is pertinent. The issues I raise above do not question the significance and value of the work, but rather the approach and style. Hopefully the spirit and thinking that could spark 'little suns' could remain.

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