

Beyond the Apocalypse

An Unfinished Meditation on Ethics

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Prelude: The Brick Wall of the Imagination

Around the time of the Fall, Hollywood was in the process of making a \$70-million film version of *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells' early novel (1895). It was directed, interestingly enough, by his great-grandson, Simon Wells.

H.G. Wells' original story is narrated by a member of the London bourgeoisie who assembles in the evenings with stock-figure bourgeois friends ("the Lawyer", "the Psychologist", "the Editor", "the Doctor"; he is referred to only as "the Time Traveller") to hear these incredible stories of the future. Having discovered that time is only another dimension within which movement is as possible as in the first three, the Time Traveller tells of his journey to the world of 800,000 years in the future where the human species has split into two: the bourgeoisie has become a race of effete aesthetes ("Eloi") who are preyed upon by the Morlocks, a hideously transformed working class, entirely dehumanised by underground toil. After his own narrow escape from the Morlocks, the hero embarks on a meditative exploration of the even more distant future – ending up thirty million years away – where the simultaneously enfeebling and brutalising forces of capitalism have finally destroyed humanity.

Two things should be noted.

First, the dispassionate context of the narration. The Time Traveller is a scientist motivated simply by the acquisition of knowledge and completely involved in the telling of it. There is no attempt to enliven the fireside chat amongst educated men from different intellectual backgrounds, for this ability of such men to comprehend all has its own drama: it is central to the heroism of nineteenth-century imperial bourgeoisie.

The second point is the extraordinary periodicity of a story which, after all, is about the very contemporary issues of Wells' class based society. So eternal is the class system of industrial capitalism that its effects are still dominating the progress of nature thirty million years into the future. While the story speaks of the threat to humanity that the class system represented, readers at the time cannot have felt that the dangers he was describing were exactly imminent; and indeed the triumph of bourgeois science and the magnitude of the capitalist project seem far more impressive in his story than their eventual decline.

A number of changes, apparently minor, in Simon Wells' scenario transform the vision of the novel utterly. In fact, Wells junior was adamant that the demands of film and of our more relaxed times necessitated a new vision:

"The problem with adapting *The Time Machine* from the book is that it was written much more as an essay about the grand scheme of time and is less of a personal adventure story. To be honest, I'd feel rather cheated if the movie were a word-for-word version of the book".¹

Despite his family ties, Wells chose to eliminate most of the class issues from the film because "A hundred years on from when the book was published, I'm not sure the class struggle is all that relevant".²

Alexander Hartdagen, his (no longer anonymous) hero, now based in New York, is neither disinterested nor dispassionate: he undertakes his experiments in time travel in order to try and undo the murder of his fiancée; when his successful arrival in the past does not avert her death a second time he decides to travel in the opposite direction to see if future humankind has discovered why the past cannot be changed. He lands in 2037 where a space exploration catastrophe has caused the moon to rain down on the earth, destroying capitalist society utterly. He only just manages to escape from the disaster zone, and collapses, stunned, over the controls of his machine as it careers 800,000 years hence. There is of course now no historical continuity between the world he discovers and our own since the technological disaster has created a *tabula rasa*; and yet the pastoral community of the future has made a little place of contemplation out of stone fragments from the past ('Brooklyn Bridge' and 'New York Public Library') from which, amazingly enough, some of them have been able to learn English. Hartdagen saves the people of the future, falls in love with the most buxom and beautiful of them and decides to stay, teach them all English and describe for them the wonders of American civilisation – 8,000 centuries after its destruction. His destiny is tragic: once he finds out that he is living at the end of capitalist time he does nothing but settle down with ignorant people and teach them to join him in mourning it.

The shift from a 19th century vision of capitalism, in which it sets the terms of the world for thirty million years to come, to this one in which it destroys itself through technological hubris a mere thirty-five years from now, is dramatic. Of course the 20th century was full of voices, often dissenting ones, predicting technological calamity; but what is remarkable is that this has, increasingly over the last twenty years, become the orthodox vision of the future in that crucible of capitalist fantasy, Hollywood. From *Bladerunner*, *Aliens* and *Brazil* to *Gattaca*, *Dark City*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *The Matrix* and the recent *Minority Report*, the idea that technological and corporate excesses will destroy us over an ever shrinking timeframe has become the received wisdom of cinema.

But just as the nineteenth-century bourgeois' confident and epic relationship with time in Wells' novel must be understood not in terms of how events were actually to unfold, but in terms of how a specific set of circumstances contributed to a certain confident relationship with the course of history, so we must see Hollywood's "precipice of time" not simply as an objective narrative of impending apocalypse, but as a sign that the framework within which we recognise ourselves as 'our selves' is in crisis, and that we are thus unable to project these 'selves' confidently into the future. More precisely, I choose to see in this a lurking sense that the structures (political, social, legal, etc.) through which we have constructed ourselves as agents of history in control of our future, have become inadequate in the face of the seemingly more mighty, and historically more consequential, forces of techno-

logy and capitalism. The cessation of 'our' time in these films is about the imagined expiry of these structures, and this expiry is seen as apocalyptic because whatever framework will supersede our current thinking and allow human time to continue is currently difficult to imagine. In short, the end of capitalist time in such movies is a brick wall at the end of our own imagination.

This 'brick wall' has not gone unnoticed. The last five years have seen the emergence of a now well established genre of apocalyptic writing by dissenting economists and scientists who see the twin juggernauts of freewheeling capitalism and new technologies sweeping away everything that we know and value. In most cases such books and articles are unable to point towards convincing solutions, and end on a grave and somewhat mystical note: if we are to avoid the foregoing terrible scenarios we had better sit up and think very hard about ourselves. The debate leaves behind, in other words, the specific areas of IMF policy or the declining power of national governments or the threat of genetically modified foods, and gestures despairingly towards a different territory: the realm of ethics.

I am entirely in agreement with the idea that we are all currently faced with profound ethical questions. I think that our inability to imagine our own future is, fundamentally, a breakdown of an ethical imagination. I also think, however, that the way in which these problems are often discussed is too quaint to really address the scale of our imagination block. The rest of this essay will seek to find points of departure for the imagination of a new ethics.

The Failure of Ethics: A Biotechnological Scenario

Where does the sense come from that our current ethical framework is not working? Let us look at a simple scenario drawn from the world of biotechnology – one of the most popular subjects for dystopian fantasies. This is the kind of scenario that would inform a popular sci-fi nightmare like *Gattaca* (1999).

It seems difficult to imagine that genetic 'improvements' will not be offered in the marketplace to new parents at some point soon in order to give their future children the best life possible. After all, this would only be an extension of the same logic of technological improvement that governs discourses of inoculation, fitness, dietary supplements, etc. It would only be one more service being offered in our crowded marketplace; only another set of companies bringing the benefit of their research to consumers and making legitimate revenues from their investment. In this context, would it not be nearly impossible for any parent who could afford such a technology to shun advantages for their children that would probably be decisive in a biotechnological future; would there not be a massive boom in the industry as every family acted in its own private way out of a fear of relegating their child to a future exclusion or obsolescence; would all this not happen in spite of the fact that many of these parents would feel great moral concern or even repugnance at what they were doing; would it not be facilitated, rather than hindered, by the ruminations of in-house corporate bioethics experts whose impressive jargon and moral seriousness would help people to suspend their uncertainty; would it not, independently of the desires of any of the individual actors, necessarily generate a society obsessed with genetic hierarchy in which

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the children of the poor were doubly cursed – through poverty and through genetic inferiority; and would not this make a mockery of the discourses of rights and equality, dependent as they are on that essential liberal category – the *species* – that has defined the terms of moral and political philosophy for the last two hundred years?

All the tiny steps on the path to such a scenario are in themselves both plausible and humdrum – it would seem strange even to raise moral questions about many of them. Yet the world that would come about through this process is, at this point in time, alien and, to many of us, horrific. In contemplating such a sequence of events it is easy to feel that the ethical opinions that human beings might hold have become rather irrelevant to the course of history and that ‘human time’, in this sense, is in its last days. Easy to see why the subjectivity of the age is put forward in culture, not as rational and epic, but as private, painful, and constrained. Ours is not the relaxed armchair contemplation of a future that our curiosity and energy can only improve, but the fear that we will be able to do nothing while technology takes us over and destroys us – even as we continue to put our faith in new cures, new security systems and new forms of communication.

Such “sci-fi” scenarios as that sketched above encapsulate effectively and melodramatically a more everyday sense: (1) that the interlocking systems of technological development, state power and commerce are leading us into social situations where the moral discourse of capitalist societies (liberalism, democracy, peace, progress, etc) will finally become completely unsustainable; and (2) that the direction in which these systems are headed will not in any way be set by the ethical beliefs and practices of individuals and informal communities. I would suggest that the fundamental problem that we face lies in this second point: in the complete disjunction of ethical experience between informal, interpersonal networks, and formalised, impersonal systems.

The Narrowing Ethical Code

If we are pessimistic about our ethical future, it is not because people don’t know how to be ethical anymore. In such informal networks as families, friends, many small communities and trading circuits, some online communities, ethical codes are an important part of the functioning of social life. Most of us live our lives with a set of ethical values which are important components of who we consider ourselves to be and how we are known by those around us. The problem we face is not about people’s inability to think or behave ethically. It is rather that the operation of this “ethics” has become increasingly restricted as more and more of life becomes formalised and dominated by a larger logic that is not available to individuals for negotiation or manipulation.

Why we feel this narrowing of our ethical possibilities is not particularly obscure; I give here only those observations that are relevant to what follows:

> Everyday experiences of work provide an increasingly stark sense of the difference between the ethical climates of informal and formal settings. While an individual may place a high value, for instance, on compassion when thinking about her interpersonal behaviour, she may be taught that harshness will be a much more successful strategy for her dealings in the workplace. This placing aside of personal ‘values’ in favour of institutional ‘techniques’

while one is at work has become much more significant over the past twenty years. When Hollywood wishes to demonstrate that someone is a good person they must show us how much they love their spouse and children: the domestic has become the only place where ethics is easy to represent.

> The sense of the global. The national stage, especially in 'welfare states', allowed citizens to subcontract their ethical responsibilities towards their fellow citizens to governments through taxation, and thus to find an ethical framework that bound their domestic, professional and civic lives. It now becomes impossible to avoid the sense of being part of a *global* system, which simultaneously extends the potential ethical responsibilities of the individual while denying him even a theoretical framework for fulfilling them. This creates political personae fraught with ethical uncertainty.

> The vocabulary of ethics has retreated significantly from debates on the economic system which gives shape to so many of the formal structures of our lives. The assorted assaults on, and failures of, organised alternatives to free market capitalism over the last two decades have allowed the market to occupy significantly more of our imaginative space: it is no longer an ideology, simply a fact. The market need make no reference to outside moral principles: it has a set of procedures and regulations which, if they are upheld, are supposed to guarantee that all outcomes from the system are just. If such a situation seems risky for ethics – since the system becomes an end in itself, immune to moral critique – it is remarkable how deeply it has taken hold in many places of the world.

> The sense that the 'large debates' of society, as opposed to our own personal dilemmas, require a very different set of skills from the ones we have available to us. It is crucial to note the critical importance of 'experts' within the systems that generate and manage the incredible dynamism of our world, discrediting not only all 'amateur' thought, but also most intercourse between different areas of thought (such as moral philosophy and science). The intellectual and expressive passivity that is prescribed in this way as the proper attitude of the individual is one of the primary issues that must be addressed by any ethics of social systems.

Even this cursory picture gives a sense of why it is that individuals might feel that, in contrast to an intimate or informal sphere of human plenitude, the world at large might seem alienating and out of control, and why we might be faced with a "brick wall of the imagination" when we try to construct a credible ethics for it.

Two Common Strategies

Unfortunately, the most common strategies for thinking about how to solve the problems of our future keep this separation between formal systems and the informal life of individuals firmly in place.

The most obvious place to turn if we wish to address the problems of a world without ethics and 'out of control' is to regulation – i.e. to the tools of management. It is of course entirely right that powerful institutions should be regulated. But it should be clear, too, that our problem of an ethical imagination is not solved by simple regulatory 'containment':

First of all, a regulatory framework is not something that enters laboratories and corporations from the outside. We are living in the most regulated world that has ever existed, and the power of those forces that seem to evade ethical control is dependent on this regulation. Regulations may prevent certain forms of undesirable behaviour but they also reinforce the non-negotiability of impersonal processes. This is precisely what has contributed to the obsolescence of ethics in favour of institutional authority.

Secondly, and this follows on from the above, all regulation is about defining legitimate and illegitimate behaviour, and it is not only powerful institutions that are controlled by this. Every category of our being (space, leisure time, the body, everything we say or write, etc.) is over-determined by a stranglehold of regulation that makes it increasingly impervious to new thought. Much of the cautiousness, passivity and hopelessness we feel when we try to imagine new realities for ourselves is due to the fact that our reality is not ours to imagine differently.

Finally, it should be clear that even if regulation will have to be a part of any ethical thinking that is trying to address problems on such a large scale, it must logically be preceded by an ethical vision of which this regulation will be an expression. After all, and this is crucial, we *already have* a complex regulatory system, which has not prevented us getting into the dire straits we are in today.

But a second position is also often put forward, by conservative critics and radicals alike, that people themselves need to become more sensitive to the problems of the world. A recent essay by Zygmunt Bauman outlines the great moral challenges of the "global" society, and concludes thus:

"The awesome task of raising morality to the level of new, global challenges may well start from heeding the simple advice [Richard] Rorty offers: 'We should raise our children to find it intolerable that we who sit behind desks and punch keyboards are paid ten times as much as the people who get their hands dirty cleaning our toilets, and hundred times as much as those who fabricate our keyboards in the Third World.'"³

Again, we can have no argument with moral sensitivity. But this idea too is a greatly inadequate response to the problems we are discussing:

Firstly, it is a problem posing as a solution. Bauman says nothing about how we might go about making people 'better', although his comments about the family confirm one's suspicion that the *modus operandi* of this "turn to psychology" is social conservatism: a nostalgic valorisation of a lost order of familial stability, religious instruction, etc. Once again, this is to solve nothing. The technological drive of capitalism is a rapid and exhilarating one, to which nostalgia is always going to be an ineffectual response.

It is also highly questionable whether we are living at a time when people are particularly insensitive. There is nothing that anyone could present as evidence that contemporary human beings are more or less 'moral' than those of another time. In the last section we discussed precisely how even if moral concerns are the most important thing in your life, the problem of how you behave morally in a world of large, impersonal forces is one that poses an almost impossible challenge to the imagination.

Finally, to pin our ethical hopes on the myth of the 'better' human being is a gesture of desperation. Because there is no way that an ethics that can merge with the forces of mar-

ket society and take them over can be based simply on individual feelings of compassion or honesty or community. It must engage with systems and social forms, and it must, at some level, be indifferent to individuals' moral thinking, just as capitalism is itself – for we have long since left behind the age of the moral consensus and we are not going to find it again soon.

From the 'remoralisation' of society to ethical consumption to better corporate governance to global regulatory bodies: the responses to these issues, even by brilliant and radical critics, are conspicuous by their conservatism. We need to find a new vision, in which the fundamental divide between the logics of informal and formal systems are overturned, and in which the ethical creativity of individuals and communities can be allowed to interact in more significant ways with the knowledge of institutions.

A Half-glimpse of a New Ethics

This new vision, I would argue, will not consist of a set of ideas. It will consist of a set of procedures by which we can build a new kind of ethical agency for ourselves. The profound sense of disenfranchisement, and the accompanying fears of a desperate, amoral future, is what we need to tackle first – and this can only happen by imagining new kinds of community and communication through which informal ethical practices can be given greater salience.

Our ethics must concentrate less on the plodding development of great ideas and more on the modes by which a variety of ideas, perhaps sketchy and unfinished, can become dynamic energies in the public domain. We cannot assume that the mere existence of ethical, critical argument is enough in itself to transform the terms of a particular debate; we will look at how ideas can take on a life in a community. And we will seek to overturn the fantasy of the perfect regulatory system, and the crippling inferiority complex that sets the horizon of possibility for the 'non-expert' in market society, by encouraging new forms of public knowledge and expression.

The last decade has given us some striking examples of how networks of people can create and organise themselves into new community forms, often with compelling ethical visions. Such projects, I would argue, are essential if we are to avoid pinning all our hopes on mere unfelt regulation or on a more sensitive generation to come. We need to look into unknown territory. Perhaps there we will find new forms of human relationship and ethical thought that will allow us to believe in a long future.

NOTES

1. "Director Wells keeps *Time* in the family" (*Chicago Sun-Times* 29 March 2002).
2. "*Time Machine* emphasis shifts to love interest" (*The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 3 March 2002).
3. Bauman, Zygmunt "Whatever happened to compassion?" (in Bentley, Tom and Daniel Stedman Jones (eds) *The Moral Universe Demos*, 2001, London) p. 56.