THE LOST SOCIAL SUBJECT: EVALUATING THE RULES BY WHICH WE LIVE

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Summary

Showing that neither the ethics of individual decision nor immutable laws can comprehend the social subject and its choice spaces, this chapter explains the deciding plane of the human condition as the rules by which we live and defines the ultimate principles of their evaluation and advance.

9.1. The Egocentric Circle: How the World Disappears in Philosophy and Economics

The “egocentric predicament” is an age-old philosophical problem – namely, that nothing can be proved beyond one’s own conscious states. Solipicism and scepticism are philosophical positions which deny that there is any certain way beyond this circle, and philosophy has been haunted by the problem since the ancients. Even the
philosopher entering heaven asks, “How do I know this is not a snare and a delusion?”

Meta-tactics have developed to avoid the ultimate conundrum. Suspension of judgment becomes an unwritten standard of philosophical comportment, and philosophy tends to stay within meanings and relationships among words. In contemporary theory, abstract rational selves in a vacuum decide what is just, good or valid, while in practice, selves choose what they want in markets of commodities and politicians.

In all, a world-view develops in which *nothing is seen to decide but individual preferences, and there is no value but what they choose*. Other ways of understanding are alien - “collectivist”, “Marxist”, “deciders for others”, “ghost entities”, and so on.

9.1.1. A General Tuning Out of the World

In contemporary moral philosophies and theories of justice, self-referential debates abstract out the world and build *ex nihilo* on themselves. That is, professional philosophers begin with interpretations of what the dominant theories have claimed, with what philosophers in central institutions say about them as reference body including what has been argued for or against them that is in fashion, and especially what has been said in response to them in secondary debates, *ad infinitum*. No life-ground ever emerges to view to constrain obligation to its requirements. That the internal mechanics of the arguments position themselves within the received debates is all that normally counts. It follows that when actual universal interests of humanity come to be directly threatened, there are no shared grounds to recognize the crises of the actual world or to steer out by life coordinates of understanding.

Outside of philosophy, a parallel autism rules. For example, professional economic understanding adopts technical and mathematical symbols in equations and graphs which become autonomous circuits of meaning that substitute for the material world. What does not appear within them does not exist to theory, for example, people’s actual life needs. Necessity is thus what follows from the given axioms, not what people require to live through generational time.

9.2. The Common Life Interest beneath Rule By Private Rights

Despite this systemic disconnection from the life-ground by contemporary theory and doctrine, humanity’s underlying longer-term pattern of civilization has, in fact, been *life-protective norms developed across cultures* - for example, against depredation of common resources, letting the young or old die, attacking others at will, appropriating others’ homes, or sexual molestation or rape.

Yet all of these actions are freely permitted in Nature’s competition for survival which evolutionary and economic theories adopt as their model of reproductive success. It as if the very basis of humanity’s civilization and difference from the brutes was being blocked out by the ruling value syntax of thought.
9.2.1. Market-Era Amnesia of the Civil Commons

Transcultural laws and customs defending human life are elements of the long-developing but generally unseen civil commons discussed in the prior chapter - that is, all social constructs which enable universal access to life goods, from language and life-protective laws to public life spaces, libraries and parks, and supportive care when helpless. Civil commons, however, are not widely recognized in philosophy or the sciences, including Marxian varieties. Although its structures differentiate humanity from the natural struggle for survival in every case, these evolved community support systems and their historical actualization of the common life interest are screened out of even theory which focuses on “the commons”.

For example, Elinor Ostrom’s Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action (1990), for which she received the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics, examines only small-scale commons organized and governed by individuals in the private sector, without government funding, or legal enforcement, or life-value criterion. Civil commons at the system-wide level remain without a known name even as battles are fought in the street for their particular forms (e.g., government protection of ecological commons, labor rights, application of international law against war crimes, public programs for life security of all kinds, enforced rules against bio-piracy and seed contamination, and so on).

The evolution of civil commons underlies humanity’s civilization itself, as this analysis explains, but their formations have been increasingly invaded, defunded and enclosed in bits – most poignantly in fee-privatization of public infrastructures of primary education and healthcare in Africa so as to pay compound interest to foreign banks.

9.2.2. Against the Grain: Recognizing the Social Subject and Civil Commons

What is not recognized is not defended or extended. The substance of humanity’s onto-ethical development - what John Stuart Mill called “the permanent interests of mankind as a progressive being” – may be acknowledged in resonant phrases, but not criterially defined. The closest Mill comes, as we know, is the utilitarian principle - maximization of happiness and minimization of pain. Yet these interests are subjective, impermanent, and not necessarily progressive as we have seen in The Transcultural Idea: The Good as Happiness and the Bad as Pain.

The methodological problem is that what transient selves want or decide as individuals or aggregates cannot recognize what has been left out – what societies in fact choose by the rules its members live by. The social subject is not recognized. The system-deciding rules we live by dissolve into the given. Society’s rule-governed self creation is not examined as a moral system. Civil commons are not even named.

Failure to conceive humanity’s shared life and life foundations is endemic to ruling doctrines through history. Even universal water and sewer systems so basic to common life today had to be struggled for underneath policy and theory by London women over a century ago in the face of industrial squalor and cholera epidemics, and are now themselves under money-privatization pressures across the world. Instead of further
advance on the strength of what societies have won by universalizing life goods and standards, there is a reverse tendency whose philosophical frame is the self-maximizing market individual. Indeed lead advocates of this global market revolution, F.A. Hayek and Margaret Thatcher, have claimed “there is no such thing as society”.

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memes” by whose “universal ruthless selfishness” action is explained.]

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Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1968), The Social Contract (trans. G.D.H. Cole), 100 pp. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books [Rousseau’s best known but widely misunderstood work featuring the grounding idea of “giving the law to oneself” to resolve the conflict between individual freedom and state law, with citizens choosing “the common interest” to constitute the “general will” of democratic government.]

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Samuelson, Paul and Nordhaus W.D. (2005), ECONOMICS, 784 pp. New York: McGraw-Hill. [The standard global reference text and classic of contemporary economics in which the preface invokes the value imperative to “Spread the gospel of economics anyway we can”.]

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1972), Critique of Dialectical Reason. 2 Vols. London: Verso Books. [Sartre’s major work after his earlier 1953 classic of existential phenomenology, Being and Nothingness, seeking to synthesize individual existential choice with Marxian dialectical reason.]

Schopenhauer, Arthur (1818/1957), The World as Will and Representation, 3 vols. London: Routledge. [This is Schopenhauer’s definitive work, the classic “pessimistic philosophy” in virtue of its depiction of cosmic life as a round of blind desire, competitive struggle and suffering which leads reason to “denial of the will to live”].

Schweitzer, Albert (1936), “The Ethics of Reverence for Life”, Christendom, 1. 225-39. [This is perhaps the most crystalline argument for Schweitzer’s flagship “new ethics” rebutting prior ethics for “an absolute ethics of will-to-live [which] must reverence every form of life, seeking so far as possible to refrain from destroying any life, regardless of its particular type.”]


Sen, A (1998), The Possibility of Social Choice”, 37pp. Trinity College, Cambridge: Nobel Lecture [This lecture provides an incomparably rich documentation of the literature on social choice, demonstrating there is no conception of social choice in received social science or philosophy other than as an aggregation of individual choosers.]

most comprehensive study of theories of love from Plato to Sartre, it argues for love as “bestowal of value” on the love object without life-value considerations.]

Smith, Adam (1776/1966), An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. 2 vols. New York: A.M. Kelley. [Possibly the most influential work in history, the founding work of “the moral science” of modern economics.]

Spinoza, Baruch (1985), The Collected Works of Spinoza (ed. E. Curley), 7 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [Spinoza’s most studied work, the Ethics is a deductive system modelled on Euclid’s definitions, axioms and theorems in which God or infinite substance is conceived as the rational system of the universe in its thinking and extended modes and infinite attributes which can be better (more adequately) or worse (less adequately) comprehended.]


Taylor, Charles (1989), Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity, 601pp. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. [This is a standard work in what is called “communitarian ethics” for its grounding in historically developed social relations as distinct from abstract liberal selves maximizing in a “value-neutral void”, but without any common life interest or base.]

Thoreau, Henry (1965), Walden, and other writings. 732 pp. New York: Modern Library. [Thoreau’s classic writings affirming a life of harmonious simplicity and awareness in Nature and his explanation of opposition to war by non-violent civil disobedience.]


Vico, G. (1724/1984), The New Science, 445 pp. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. [In which Vico argues that humanity can only know for certain that which it has created because it is directly our construction.]


Whitehead, A.N. (1938), Modes of Thought, 172 pp. New York: Macmillan [Whitehead’s most well known lectures on his “process philosophy” which conceives Nature as “alive”, “feeling”, “purposing” and ever “creative” in the energy flows described by physics (the totality of which processes he conceives as God), as opposed to “dead” and “inert” in the Newtonian tradition.]

Wilson E.O. (1984) Biophilia (157 pp.) Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. [An eminent entymologist proposes the “biophilia hypothesis” of an innate “affinity with nature ingrained in our genotype” to explain “why humans care for other species unrelated to them.”]

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1968), Philosophical Investigations. 260 pp. New York: Macmillan. [Perhaps the most celebrated work of twentieth-century philosophy, it leads what philosophers have come to call “the linguistic turn” of philosophy with no reference to the world beyond “language games”.]

World Commission of the Environment and Development (1986). Our Common Future, New York: Oxford University Press. [This famous work endorses “five to ten times” more commodity system “growth” with no life standards of “sustainable development”]

Biographical Sketch

John McMurtry holds his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Toronto, Canada and his Ph.D from the University of London, England, and has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph for over 25 years and University Professor Emeritus since 2005. He is an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and his many articles, chapters, books and interviews have been internationally published and translated.