

THE GLOBAL CRISES OF VALUES: THE POVERTY OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Kai Nielsen

Concordia University, Montreal, and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Calgary, Canada

Keywords: Morality, Philosophy, Public Intellectuals, Poverty, Justice, Inequality, Evil

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. The Poverty of Moral Philosophy
 3. The Deep Issues We Confront
 4. Getting Along Without Positive Philosophical Views
 5. Philosophy and Ethical Life
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

Some of the key urgent moral-political-economic problems that bedevil our world are specified. It is then argued out that at least mainstream contemporary philosophy has failed to come to grips with these problems. It is further argued that philosophy lacks the capacity and the resources to come to grips with them. Metaphysics, epistemology (including analytic versions of both), metaethics and systematic normative ethical theory are largely useless here. There is concerning these moral-political-economic problems need for clear sustained reflective thinking and sometimes as well (usually as a preliminary) for conceptual clarification; there is also need for the articulation of narratives of maturation and sometimes of emancipation with their attendant and dependent explanations. But metaphysics, epistemology, metaethics and systematic normative ethics (core elements of philosophy as usually conceived) just get in the way and should be up for Wittgensteinian dissolution. Yet these great moral-political-economic problems stand before us like our lives. They must be faced but without the dubious benefit of any of the variants of traditional philosophy (including analytic philosophy).

-[It] takes a lot of things to change the world:
Anger and Tenacity. Science and indignation,
The quick initiative, the long reflection,
The cold patience and infinite perseverance,
The understanding of the particular case and the
Understanding of the ensemble;
Only the lessons of reality can teach us to transform reality.

Bertolt Brecht, *Einverständnis*

1. Introduction

We should not think of our contemporary crisis, better, crises, in and of the global, moral, political and economic order as unique to us, i.e., we present day human beings. It is not. Crises have always been with us, though the plague waxes and wanes. That said, we also should realize that we are now globally, as it was for a good part of Europe during the Thirty Years' War, in a very waxing time. The advent of capitalist globalization, our plundering of the planet, our rapacious consumerism, abetted by our technological capacities to fuel it, has produced, not to put too fine a point on it, a world of degrading and cumulating horror. Yet by and large our fundamental normative moral-*cum*-political-*cum*-economic problems are ignored by philosophers and, more importantly and alarmingly, by governments or, where they do respond to them at all, they respond superficially and inadequately. If our governments were individuals, they could be described as in a state of psychological denial.

Section 2 explains a main contention of this chapter - the poverty of moral philosophy in ignoring this global crisis of values. Section 3 characterizes a key selection of urgent issues for humankind that philosophy has little to say about. Section 4 explains why moral and social philosophy and, indeed, philosophy more generally, as it is practiced in its various ways, does not have the resources to at all adequately come to grips with them. (Perhaps, at least in the various ways it is traditionally conceived, it does not have the resources to come to grips with them.) To see how we can transform our world into being a reasonable humane social order where the lives of everyone—and as equally as reasonably possible—can to some reasonable degree flourish is the central challenge (Nielsen 2003).

It is natural to feel that such a tall order cannot even be approximated. The task, it is hard not to feel, is just too great. It would require a deep understanding of life in various conditions spread throughout the world, a knowledge of geography, history, and the social sciences (Harvey 2000; Said 2001, 453-72), and in some knowledge of the history of moral and political philosophical theory; one coming up to and including its contemporary continuations, principally, but not exclusively, as done by John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, Amartya Sen, Brian Barry, and G. A. Cohen and, in the public sphere rather wonderfully, by Jean Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky and Edward Said.

Philosophy, as Richard Rorty has perceptively argued, may, seen in its long history, be a *transformational genre*, though what he sees it, and in ways desirably, being transformed into may be somewhat skewed (Rorty 2004, 3-28). Where it so moves, people so engaged offer, in their emancipatory activity, an analysis and critique of their society, spelling out how people, and as well whole classes and societies, are harmed and degraded and how opportunities for human flourishing are crushed. But they have also shown how people have resisted. And they show, as well, something of how this plays out in our society in our own time.

Intellectuals enculturated in any 'expert culture' (a determinate discipline), as analytic philosophy has become, would, though perhaps unwarrantedly, come to feel, could hardly *not* come to feel, faced with these 'big problems' that they are *fach idioten* (subject idiots). Is it any longer possible to take a comprehensive standpoint as when Karl Marx or even Max Weber wrote? A widely held view today is that such a comprehensive understanding

is no longer achievable. There is just too much to know and things are too complicated. For this view, the danger is that attempts at such overview thinking in an age of advanced specialized expertise are a form of generalized pontification or platitudes promising profound truths. This is why Richard Rorty proposes a contemporary position of “ironist”, a position which accepts conflicts as inherent in humanities discourse and resistant to all formulations of universal truths. On the other hand, the critic might see all this avoidance of grasping the nettle as a rationalization for safely saying and doing nothing.

Conflicts in view are healthy in philosophy, and many of them may get ironed out in the smithy of our intellectual culture as time goes on. Progress here, while not inevitable, is possible (Kumar 2003; Putnam 2004, 96-108). There is also the fact of ineliminable plurality of perspectives and conclusions. Just as there are many ways to prepare chicken breasts (consult any good cookbook), there many modes of emancipatory endeavor and many voices of the vocation of critical public intellectual. The increasingly accepted view is that to claim that there is some *one* truth and *the* way reveals *hubris*, self-deception, and that we have not taken in the non-skeptical lessons of fallibilism (Nielsen 2005).

2. The Poverty of Moral Philosophy

One could argue that we not only can but should carry out our ethical, moral and normative political thinking without metaphysics, something that is not very controversial, but as well without epistemology, metaethics or the familiar baggage of philosophical normative ethical *theory* (Putnam 2002 and 2004). In this view, it is illusory to accept the traditional belief that philosophers can provide foundations or the funding of our moral beliefs or hunt out the deep presuppositions upon which our moral thinking depends and then critically examine them or display the underlying rationale (or lack thereof) of our moral and ethical reasoning. It is illusory to think that if people come to us for help in their quest for how to live their lives or to ascertain what would be a good and just society or what would be a decent, just and good world order or to ascertain what human flourishing would come to there is much help that philosophers could give them. There are only truisms (perhaps articulated a little more clearly than they usually are), and the corrections achieved by some adroit Augean stable cleaning. In trying to come to grips with the great moral-*cum*-political-*cum*-economic problems of our lives, this “anti-foundationalist” view holds that we have in one way or another been infected by metaphysical or metaphilosophical maladies such as a belief that there is a great gulf between fact and value such that our values are, and indeed can be, really only the expression of our preferences or of our culturally inculcated preferences. If we stick just to the facts, so such a belief goes, we will never come on a value. Philosophers, doing some Augean stable cleaning, can and should show how such philosophical beliefs can and should be set aside (Putnam 2004). But beyond such stable cleaning and the assembling of reminders of some truisms, truisms that might in some contexts have been forgotten or repressed or to have become so because of some changes in our world, there is little philosophers *qua* philosophers can offer our fellow humans concerning the deep and pressing ethical, and moral-*cum*-political-*cum*-economic problems that press down on us and have pressed down on others in times past and that will press down on others at some future time. (I link moral-political-economic together because the urgent problems I speak of are such an inextricable mix.)

We may put this position in light of perhaps one of the major articulators of it. What philosophers are good at is only to collapse, as Wittgenstein saw, houses of cards. We learn more about what stance to take on these demanding ethical, moral and political issues that must press on any sensitive, reflective and reasonably informed human being from reading *Le Monde diplomatique* or the *Boston Review* than we can learn from the best of moral philosophers and, among our contemporaries, even the very great ones of our contemporary tradition, namely John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, Amartya Sen, G. A. Cohen, or Jürgen Habermas. We may wonder how much can be milked out of Sen's capabilities approach. Is it Aristotle all over again without Aristotle's, or for that matter Martha Nussbaum's, essentialism? Can Sen's approach yield a cross-cultural ranking of capabilities that will show us what we really need to find out about what constitutes human flourishing. What, then, can help in coming to grips with the demanding moral-political-economic problems with which we are faced? This coming to grips with such problems – for example, the starvation and malnutrition of the world's poor under capitalism - is not offered in metaethical inquiry. Indeed, this is not at all what it is about. This does not mean that metaethical problems are uninteresting. They can be fascinating. If we lived in even a marginally decent or in a reasonably structured world, there may be nothing more interesting to come to grips with. But in *our world* their study seems rather like fiddling while Rome burns.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 27 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

Anderson, Elizabeth (1997): What is the Point of Equality? *Ethics* Vol. 104, 287-337. [An investigation into the relationship between equality and the deeper value of the quality of life].

Anderson, Elizabeth (2005): Interview. *Imprints* Vol. 9, no. 1, 3-28. [Anderson elaborates on the key ideas of her ethical work].

Brock, Dan (1993): Quality of Life Measures in Health Care and Medical Ethics. In Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 95-132. [Brock applies the capabilities approach to social justice to the problem of health care].

Buchanan, Allen et al., eds. (2000): *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. [A deep philosophical exploration of the ethical problems of genetics research and engineering].

Chambers, Simone (2006): The Politics of Equality: Rawls on the Barricades. *Perspectives on Politics* Vol.4, no. 1, 21-29. [A consideration of the political implications and limitations of Rawl's conception of justice as fairness].

Chomsky, Noam (2005): Simple Truths, Hard Problems: Some Thoughts on Terror, Justice and Self-Defence.

Philosophy Vol. 80, 5-28. [A critique of the response of the Bush administration's response to terrorism].

Daniels, Norman (1990): Equality of What: Welfare, Resources or Capabilities? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 50 (Supplement), 273-96. [An attempt to mediate the debate between Sen, Cohen, and Arneson concerning the proper object of egalitarian politics].

Daniels, Norman (2003): Democratic Equality: Rawls's Complex Egalitarianism. In Samuel Freeman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 241-76. [An interpretation of the implications of Rawl's conception of justice as fairness].

Darwall, Stephen et al., eds. (1997): Toward *Fin de Siècle* Ethics: Some Trends. In Stephen Darwall, et al., eds., *Moral Discourse and Practice*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 3-47. [An overview of late twentieth century developments in ethical philosophy].

Falk, Richard A. (2004): *The Declining World Order*. New York, New York: Routledge. [A powerful argument that contends that developments since September 11th, 2001, indicate a worrisome decline in the power of democratic institutions].

Fine, Ben and Valyenberge, Elisa (2005): Correcting Stiglitz: From Information to Power in the World of Development. In Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register 2006: Telling the Truth*. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 146-68. [A critique of Joseph Stiglitz's account of how globalization might become more egalitarian].

Geuss, Raymond (1981): *The Idea of Critical Theory*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. [An historical-philosophical account of the development of critical theory].

Griffin, James (1993): Commentary on Dan Brock: Quality of Life Measures in Health Care and Medical Ethics. In Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 133-39. [A response to Brock's attempt to apply the capabilities approach to the problem of health care].

Guerin, Daniel and Klopper, Mary (1970): *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, with forward by Noam Chomsky. Monthly Review Press. [A history of the development of anarchism as an alternative current within the radical left].

Habermas, Jürgen (2003): *Truth and Justification*. Translated by Barbara Fultner. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. [An explanation of the epistemological implications of Habermas's idea of communicative action].

Hall, Everett (1964): *Categorical Analysis*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press. [A collection of essays in which Hall tries to make ethical objectivism consistent with empirical experience.]

Harvey, David (1990): *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell. [Harvey's complex historical investigation of postmodernism as a development resulting from changes in the capitalist mode of production but with universal implications for the organization of human society across all domains of experience and activity].

Harvey, David (2000): Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils. *Public Culture* Vol. 12, no. 2, 529-64. [An argument that contends that geographical and anthropological knowledge must inform cosmopolitan attempts at formulating a universal global ethic].

Harvey, David (2003a): *The New Imperialism*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press. [A critical historical-geographical interpretation of the development of neoliberalism].

Harvey, David (2003.b): The New Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession. In Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register 2004: The New Imperial Challenge*. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 63-87. [A concise exposition of the argument that neoliberalism operates via the privation of formerly public space].

Hobsbawm, Eric (2003): America's Imperialist Delusion. *Le Monde diplomatique*, June. 27. [A critique of the

assumptions behind the Bush administration's war in Iraq].

Ignatieff, Michael (2001): *Reflections On Exile*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. [Said's account of the impact of statelessness and exclusion from one's homeland].

Ignatieff, Michael (2002): How to Keep Afghanistan from Falling Apart: The Case for a Committed American Imperialism. *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 26-58. [A liberal defense of the invasion of Afghanistan, arguing that America has a duty to democratize failed states].

Ignatieff, Michael (2003): The Burden. *The New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 22-54. [An argument that contends that America, being the sole remaining superpower, must assume responsibility for the security of the world against the threat of terrorism].

Kumar, Chandra (2003): Progress, Freedom and Human Nature. *Imprints* Vol. 7, no. 2, 106-30. [An inquiry into the value of the idea of human nature in debates about social development].

Larmore, Charles (1999): The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism. *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 96, no. 12, 599-625. [An examination of the deep normative basis of Rawls' interpretation of social justice].

Nielsen, Kai (1993): Formalists and Informalists: Some Methodological Turnings. *Critica* Vol. XXC, no. 73, 71-81. [A consideration of the methodological implications of formal and informal logical approaches to meaning and language use].

Nielsen, Kai (1994): Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone. *Iyyun* Vol. 43, 34-41. [A defense of the position that ethical and political philosophy can be practiced without contentious metaphysical foundations].

Nielsen, Kai (1996): *Naturalism without Foundations*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books. [A pragmatic defense of philosophical naturalism that contends that the later does not require traditional forms of metaphysical philosophizing].

Nielsen, Kai (2001): Moral Point of View. In Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, eds., *Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Volume II, second edition. New York, New York: Routledge, 1141-45. [A concise explanation of the necessity of adopting a moral point of view for the comprehension and redress of fundamental problems of injustice].

Nielsen, Kai (2003a): *Globalization and Justice*. Amherst, New York: Humanities Books. [A critique of the implications of globalization, focusing on the claim that the absolute poverty in which a significant proportion of the global population exists is obviously morally indefensible].

Nielsen, Kai (2003b): On the Moral Justification of Terrorism (State and Otherwise). *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* Vol. 41, nos. 2 and 3, 427-44. [A reflection on whether terrorism can be morally justified].

Nielsen, Kai (2005): Pragmatism as Atheoreticism: Richard Rorty. *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Vol. 2, no. 1, [An investigation of the work of Richard Rorty focused on the ethical and political implications of his pragmatism].

Pogge, Thomas W. (2001): Information and Priorities of Global Justice. In Thomas W. Pogge, ed., *Global Justice*. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 1-23. [An empirical foundation for strategies to successfully address the problem of absolute poverty].

Putnam, Hilary (2002): *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. [Putnam's account of the breakdown of the fact/value distinctions central to logical positivism].

Putnam, Hilary (2004): *Ethics without Ontology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. [A defense of the position that ethics does not require the sort of universal foundations traditionally assumed in the Western philosophical tradition].

Ramonet, Ignacio (2006): Silent Thought. *Le Monde diplomatique*. May 2006, 1 (English edition). [A reflection on the vacuity of French intellectuals' response to the political mobilization of young French students and immigrant youth].

Rawls, John (1985): Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical. In Samuel Freeman, ed., *John Rawls: Collected Papers* (1999), Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 388-414. [Rawls sketches out an important revision of his classic, *Theory of Justice*, emphasizing that its key principles do not require agreement on metaphysical, religious, or scientific comprehensive doctrines].

Rawls, John (2002): For the Record. In S. Phineas Upham, ed., *Philosophers in Conversation*. New York, New York: Routledge, 3-13. [A discussion with Rawls concerning the fundamental principles of his political philosophy].

Rorty, Richard (2004): Post-Democracy. *London Review of Books* Vol. 26, no. 7, 10-11. [Rorty's speculations concerning the potential obsolescence of democracy in the United States].

Said, Edward (1993): *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Random House. [An investigation of the symbolic dimensions of imperialist domination of the non-Western world].

Stevenson, Charles (1944): *Ethics and Language*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. [A defense of the emotivist interpretation of ethics from the objection that it leads to complete ethical relativism].

Stiglitz, Joseph E. (2002): *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York, New York: Norton and Co. [A groundbreaking admission from the former World Bank executive that neoliberal policies have had serious life-destructive consequences in the poorest regions of the world].

Tan, Kok-Chor (2004): Justice and Personal Pursuits. *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 100, no. 7, 331-62. [An argument concerning the difficulties that philosophy faces in adjudicating about the justness of different individual ideas regarding the good life].

Toulmin, Stephen (2001): *Return to Reason*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. [A defense of a broader account of reason as reasonableness against the one-sided form of natural scientific reasoning that has dominated Western society since the early modern period].

Biographical Sketch

Professor Nielsen received his Ph.D. from Duke University. His specialties are metaphilosophy, contemporary ethical and political theory, and Marxism. He is the author of some 22 books and 415 articles. His most recent books are *Transforming Philosophy* (1995), and *Naturalism without Foundations* (1996).