

## **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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McMurtry, J. (2002), *Value Wars: The Global Market versus the Life Economy*, 262pp. London: Pluto

Press [This volume explains and tracks the underlying epochal principles of opposing value-systems in the 'new world order' across phenomena of wars, social system conflicts, ecological crises and public-sector meltdowns, with defining constitutional regulators for a life-grounded global order.]

McMurtry, John (2007), "The Postmodern Voice of Empire: The Metalogic of Unaccountability", *The Postcolonial and the Global*, (eds. Krishnaswamy K. and Hawley J.), 328 pp. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.[This is a systematic life-value critique of postmodern thought system within a representative text of postmodern/postcolonial positions.]

Merchant, Carolyn (1980), *The Death of Nature*, 292pp. New York: Harper and Row.[This work provides a prototype eco-feminist analysis of the images of modern scientific mechanism since Bacon and their violent usurpation of the prior central metaphor of 'earth as nurturing mother'.]

Mill, John Stuart (1963-91), *Collected Works*, 33 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. [These volumes contain the works cited in this essay, *On Liberty* and *On Utilitarianism* and the essay, "On Nature" from his *Three Essays on Religion*.]

Miller, Peter and Westra, Laura, eds (2002), 326 pp. *Just Ecological Integrity: The Ethics of Planetary Life*, Boston: Rowman and Littlefield. [Representative text of original work in environmental ethics by philosophers, social scientists and ecologists on occasion of the Earth Charter 2000.]

Mill, J.S. (1860/1996) *Utilitarianism*, 260pp. New York: Oxford University Press [This volume contains the primary modern statement of value as defined by "the Greatest Happiness Principle" wherein "all actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce pain".]

Miller, P. And Westra, L (2002), *Just Ecological Integrity: The Ethics of Planetary Life*, 326pp. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield. [This cross-current collection of articles, written for the occasion of the Earth Charter 2000 in Costa Rica, provides state-of-the-art analyses at the interface between human understanding and values, on the one hand, and ecological challenges of sustainability, on the other.]

Mirowski, P. (2000), *Machine Dreams*, 540 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [This study tracks the machine model in models of applied cognitive science into the "automaton theater" of economic, military and decision-theory research.]

Monbiot, G. (2000), *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*, 430 pp. London: Macmillan.[This analysis excels as a documented paradigm case of how rule-system formation and application by contemporary states have been captured by private corporate power.]

Moore, GE (1909), *Principia Ethica*, 272 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [This is the classic work of ethical theory of the twentieth century, and exhibits in paradigm form the close analysis of argument and agent-relative premises which have typified the dominant analytic school of Anglo-American moral theory since David Hume.]

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1964), *The Complete Works of Nietzsche* (ed. O. Levy). New York: Russell and Russell. [Includes the works in value theory referred to and critiqued throughout the Theme Essay, such as *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* which explain Nietzsche's master idea that "values are constructs of domination", and that moral will is ultimately a "will to power": with "slave morality" too as a will to power moved by *ressentiment* against the rule of "nature's aristocracy", to whose "free expression" inferior human beings "must be reduced to slaves, to tools". Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault diversely express the Nietzschean value ontology - the former in a dichotomy of *Sein* (Being) and *das Mann* (loosely, superior and mass man), and the latter in the organizing idea of a ruling knowledge/power alliance with no limit.]

Noddings, Nel (1984/2003), *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, 275pp. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. [This work leads in developing a concrete relational morality of *caring* with no onto-ethical ground.]

Noonan, J. (2003), *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*, 189 pp. Kingston-Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. [This study exposes a deep-structural contradiction between postmodern denial of any universal human essence *and* the presupposition of just such a value essence for human life to self-determine differences.] // [This pathbreaking study examines postmodernism in the works of its leading authors (e.g., principally Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Iris Young), and exposes a deep-structural contradiction - between postmodern denial of any universal human essence *and* the presupposition of just such a value essence - for human life to self-determine - which Noonan shows is

implicit in “the principle of difference” itself, and in submerged humanity’s continuous uprisings against ruling systems of oppression.]

Nozick, R. (1974), *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 367pp. New York: Basic Books. [A very influential work rejecting liberal arguments for equality of rights in favour of rights of private property to trump any kind of redistributive ethic, argument or policy.]

M.C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen eds. (1993) *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon: Oxford University Press. A major collection of articles and replies to them by leaders in the field including the editors, G.A. Cohen, Onera O’Neill, Hilary Putnam, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer, on equality, capability and well-being, gender justice, and standards of living: none of which grounds in need requirements or life support systems.]

Nussbaum, M. (1999 ) *Sex and Social Justice*, 476pp. New York: Oxford University Press.[Major work of an outstanding Aristotelian liberal and feminist, revealing in its attention to “separateness”, “the separate individual” as the ground of value understanding, the “fundamental fact of ethics”, thus entailing abstraction out of life support systems as a methodological given.]

Olson, M.(1965) *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, 176pp. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. [Along with Arrow’s Paradox, the classical and more comprehensive statement of the problem of collective action based on individual choice functions alone.]

Ostrom, Elinor (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, 280 pp. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. [Recipient of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics, Ostrom confines her study to small-scale commons organized and governed by individuals without government funding, legal enforcement, or life-value criterion.]

G. Outka and J.P. Reeder eds. (1993), *Prospectus for a Common Morality*, 302pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [This collection of original articles includes internationally recognized leaders in the field with, as elsewhere, no common life interests defined.]

Pareto, Vilfredo, (1971 [1906]), *Manual of Political Economy*, New York: A.M. Kelley [Classic of rational choice theory and economic reason whose famous principle of “Pareto optimality/efficiency” is based on dyadic asset exchange with no relation to life value.]

Parfit, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*, 543pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press. [The definitive work of this author and of contemporary discourse on “personal identity”, exemplifying fine-grained argumentation on the idea that “personal identity” means sameness through time.]

Patel, Raj (2009), *The Value of Nothing: Where Everything Costs Much More than We Think*, 250pp. Toronto: Harper-Collins [Useful work on global market failures and commons options.]

Perry, R.B. (1969), *Realms of Value: A Critique of Human Civilization*, 487 pp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [Perry provides the most comprehensive argument for the general value theory of the good = what is desired.]

Plato (1961), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns), Pantheon Books: New York. [The complete dialogues in which Socrates’ and Plato’s idealist “Theory of Forms” posits pure, transcendental and eternal ideas of which all material entities are but inferior, mutable copies.]

Polanyi, Karl (1944/2000), *The Great Transformation*, 315 pp. Boston: Beacon Press. [This canonical study lays bare the life fabric of violent transition from pre-market village society through the utopian free market cataclysm to the 1944 understanding of community instituted by public institution and the welfare state.]

Radhakrishnan, S. and Moore, C. (1957), *Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, 683pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [This is a definitive and comprehensive collection of Indian philosophy and non-Western value understanding, including the full texts of the eleven principal Upanishads, the Bhagavad-gita, and canonical selections of early and late Buddhism.]

Rawls, J. (1967), *A Theory of Justice*. 542pp. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. [This is the leading work in the field whose paradigmatic method assumes self-maximizing rational choice “including wanting a larger share for oneself” and abstract agents and institutions decoupled from life needs and collective support systems.]

Reid, G.B.R. (2007), *Biological Emergences: Evolution by Natural Experiment*, 517pp. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.[This work by a biologist explains how the “autocatalyzing” organism is a coordinating system which reduces infinite interactive possibilities to predictable pathways of homeostasis but is sufficiently flexible to allow for emergence of new types of life.]

Rescher, N. (1969), *Introduction to Value Theory*, 205 pp. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.[This monograph by the most published analytic philosopher of the last century exemplifies the era’s formalist method and symbolic notations purged of substantive issues of value.]

Robert, J.S. (2008), *Embryology, Epigenesis, Evolution*, 290pp. New York: Cambridge University Press [Critiques the one-way “genomania” which has swept over contemporary evolutionary biology and popular thought, as in sociobiology, with value choice erased.]

Rorty, R. (1989), *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 289 pp. New York: Cambridge University Press. [With his earlier *The Mirror of Nature* (1979), this work is the most prominent text of the anti-foundationalist movement in philosophy, denying any common standard of truth or value].

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1984), *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (trans. M. Cranston), 182 pp. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books [Rousseau conceives human beings in their natural state of human language, reason and species sympathy before private property, division of labor and vain desires corrupt and alienate them.]

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.]

Russell, Bertrand (1983- ), *Bertrand Russell: Collected Papers*, 29 vols. London: Allen and Unwin. [Includes Russell’s prolific corpus of philosophical and public works, including his regret of twentieth-century philosophy’s wide abandonment of “understanding the world itself , that grave and important task which philosophy throughout has hitherto pursued”].

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”.]

Searle, J.R. (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, 238 pp. New York: Free Press. [Searle argues clearly for the irreducibly symbolic and rule-governed character of objective human reality not possibly explicable by physical particles and fields of force.]

Sen, Amartya (1977).”Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, 317-44. [This classic article argues against the purely selfish understanding of self-maximizing rationality.]

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.]

Singer, Irving (1966 -1987), *The Nature of Love*, 3 volumes. Chicago: Chicago University Press. [The

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.]

Tompkins, P. And Bird, C., *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973). 402 pp. New York: Harper & Row [This book provides extensive evidence for the sentience of plants.]

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 awakens in Nature and his explanation of opposition to war by non-violent civil disobedience.]

Trungpa, C. (1988). *Shambala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. 202 pp. Boston: Shambala Press [A leading example of contemporary conception of religious illumination and practice as that of a “warrior path” of happiness, here the Tibetan Buddhist “vehicle of the thunderbolt”.]

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.]

Weisbrot, M., Baker, D., and Rosnick, D. (2006). “The Scorecard on Development: 25 Years of Diminishing Progress”, *International Journal of Health Services* 36,2: 211-234.[Scientific identification of the pattern of degrading human life systems during market-system globalization.]

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 entomologist 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.