THE GLOBAL CRISES OF VALUES: THE POVERTY OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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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, Einverstandnis
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.

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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).