

## MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN QUESTION

**John McMurtry**

*Department of Philosophy, University of Guelph, Guelph N1G 2W1, Canada*

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### Summary

What is the ground of value by whose compass we ought to live? This essay explains why this ultimate question is screened out by contemporary philosophy, and evaluates a conflicting spectrum of major value theories to determine each's soundness as a guide to individual and social life - analytic moral philosophy, market and Marxian doctrines, organic desire theory, and transcendental ideals.

A needs theory of value alone is found alone to provide an objective ground of moral truth, but is shown to be limited in its comprehension of what is of intrinsic worth. In conclusion, the chapter proposes a bridge across materialist and idealist philosophies by life-value onto-ethics.

### **3.1. The Underlying Problem of Moral Philosophy: Decoupling from the Life-Ground**

Competing moral theories are numerous. They include not only the pro-happiness and anti-pain theories analyzed in the prior chapter, but virtue and self-realizationist ethics, emotivism, intuitionism, religious ethics, contractarian morality, and so on.

What is in common across these diverse moral philosophies is what they all lack. As we will continue to see in this study, the baseline principles of received moral and value theories are decoupled from the life-ground - all the conditions everyone requires to draw the next breath. Even when values are reconnected to body-activating desires, still no connection to life capacities, needs or support systems is made. Yet before we map this moral life-groundlessness across theories, we need to remind ourselves of the underlying distinction between moral values and other kinds of value.

The basic difference is that moral positions tell us what ought to be done, and moral philosophy properly investigates what these ought-claims mean, how they disagree, whether they stand up to critical scrutiny, and - ultimately - whether their regulating principles are truly universalizable and overriding. The underlying pattern through over 25 centuries of such moral thinking, however, has been the absence of any sustained agreement on what these ultimate moral principles *are*. This age-old pattern has culminated - as shown in the previous sections - in a widespread denial in the cosmopolitan world of today that universal moral principles are even possible across diverse world-views and practices. The consensus has become that such moral principles are no longer credible across cultural and domain differences.

#### **3.1.1. Non-Prescribed Values and the Limits of Moral Meaning**

Non-moral values, in contrast, are values which do *not* tell people how to act. Beauty, for example, may have sound standards to recognize it (an issue which the field of Aesthetics investigates), but it makes little sense to say that beauty is obligatory. On the contrary, beauty is likely to be a creative or sublime configuration beyond beholders' own capacities to imitate, and thus not prescribable as moral rules.

There may also be standards of knowledge and truth (the question with which the field of Epistemology is concerned), but this area of philosophy too is kept distinct from moral philosophy insofar as non-compliance does not, as with moral rules, entail guilt or punishment for those not following them.

### **3.2. The Conventional Tendency: Prescribing and Punishing Without Good Reason**

With conventional moral thought, a main problem is the imposition of prescriptions and prohibitions where there is no moral justification for them. Consider, for example, customs and laws which demand conformity to standards that are merely issues of taste, opinion or religious belief with no life harm involved in breaking them. There are myriad such conventional prescriptions and punishments for disobeying them, and all may be judged a wrong so far as they disable rather than enable people's lives, as with

life-blind conventions elevated to universal commands.

Distinguishing reasonable and unreasonable moral demands is what John Stuart Mill (1806-73) painstakingly seeks to do in his classic, *On Liberty* (1859). “The only justification for society interfering in the liberty of any of its members”, Mill famously argues, “is self-protection” or “to prevent harm”.

Life-value ethics specifies the distinction much more precisely. It adds the modifying qualifying phrase “*life capacities*” to define exactly *what* is to be protected and not harmed - an unanswered issue in Mill’s and other moral theories. The harm principle is spelled out in such a way that another cannot say harm is done by actions which do not reduce anyone’s range of life function.

### **3.3. The Professional Tendency: Moral Philosophy without Life Substance**

The profoundest limitation of contemporary moral philosophy itself is that, unlike Mill, its arguments typically fail to engage issues of moral substance i.e., relevant to how we live. On the contrary, this most basic question of moral thought, how we ought to live, has been essentially avoided, especially with regard to the surrounding ruling system of reward and deprivation. Here, at the very ultimate ground of moral substance, there tends to be pronounced silence.

#### **3.3.1. Technical Exclusion**

On the fine-grained level, the method of avoidance of moral substance consists simply in ruling out any issue that does not technically fit within the given parameters of the specialty discourse.

Instead, questions of the logical status of ought, stylized taxonomies of competing moral theories and stock counter-arguments, and specialist disputes emptied of life content prevail in moral philosophy. A *cordon sanitaire* is invisibly drawn against substantive moral issues. Or, at the other extreme, stereotyped media issues - for example, pro and con capital punishment or abortion - may be endlessly revisited with ruling social value system unexamined.

#### **3.3.2. Substantive Exclusion**

Substantive ethics thus disappear into a thin formalism, as Kai Nielsen’s chapter entitled *The Poverty of Moral Philosophy* shows. Nielsen, like the dominant method he describes, fails to distinguish between the ruling style of moral philosophy and substantive moral philosophy with a life-ground.

#### **3.3.3. Meta-Ethics and Agent-Relative Moral Theory: The Life-Ground Abstracted Out**

In general, moral philosophy and ethics in the globally dominant Anglo-American tradition are equated to what is called “*meta-ethics*” which in principle rules out issues of substantive good and evil. Analyses are confined to arguments about the logic and

received types of moral theory and a-priori exclude actual moral problems of life-and-death choice. Meta-ethics as the descriptor for such inquiry takes this very thin version of value analysis as its given.

Another unnoticed form of blocking out issues of ultimate moral substance - such as the moral principles by which societies themselves live - is to confine moral agency to *individual* judgment and action, or “*agent-relative*” ethics. Thus the rules regulating society itself are screened out. On the other hand, philosophers who do call into question basic assumptions of the ruling value-system within which they live are may not survive as philosophers - as the execution of Socrates reminds us. Today, the punishment is more likely to be no position in graduate or faculty philosophy.

### 3.3.4. Methodological Censorship and the Contractarian Model

The unseen structure of contemporary censorship is ignoring or defunding whatever conflicts with the presupposed social value regime. Typically any such social heresy is methodologically screened out prior to scrutiny. Contemporary philosophy, for example, features fictive contracts of atomic rational agency to define the just or moral order in rigorous abstraction from the actual world’s relationships. While the modern “contractarian model” begins with theories of justice grounded in alleged “laws of nature” - for example, the theories of Thomas Hobbes (1558-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) - they nowhere question their surrounding regimes of rule.

In the latter twentieth century, the contractarian model switches its ground of legitimacy - from laws of nature to self-maximizing rational agents choosing abstract principles of justice and morality in a methodological life vacuum (e.g., John Rawls (1921-2006) and David Gauthier (1932 - ). Such “social/moral contract” constructions are one major convention among others in contemporary moral thought: but despite their very clear differences from each other, they are alike in decoupling analysis from any life-ground or challenge to the existing social order.

### 3.3.5. Blocking Out How We Live

Thus although philosophy is the only form of inquiry methodologically suited to call into question the first principles of any ruling value system, this is tacitly taboo territory for critical inquiry. Such investigation need not be directly outlawed. In Islamic states or medieval Christendom or contemporary capitalism alike, methodological set-points of inquiry fence this thought zone off. At the same time, the received set-points of contemporary social science block out such inquiry in the name of “value neutrality”. In these ways, the relevant academic disciplines avoid critical investigation of the first principles of how we in fact live.

**3.3.5.1.** Moral philosophers and ethical theorists are more concerned with the nature of moral language and whether right is to be judged by consequences of actions (“consequentialism”) or the principles governing the actions themselves (“non-consequentialism” or “deontology”), the most persistent area of dispute. In applied ethics, selected issues within isolated and abnormal conditions are much analyzed, but not the ultimately regulating norms of society’s everyday life and their relationship to

social and ecological life support systems.

### **3.4. Evaluating Social Value Systems: Off-Limits Even to Marxian Thought**

The failure of moral theories East and West has been that the ruling social order is seldom if ever opened to question, and almost never critically investigated as a value system.

An apparent exception is the general theory of Karl Marx (1818-83). Yet he himself rejected the study of morality and moral theory, regarding them as merely rationalizing forms of ideology justifying the economic order and the overriding rights of the ruling class.

#### **3.4.1. The Unexamined Value System That Governs the Economy**

One need not disagree with Marx's critique to recognize that he fails to recognize that ultimately regulating principles of value and disvalue govern the economic order itself, organizing rules of money value which govern every function of the system. Thus, in fact, "the money sequence of value", as explained in *The Global Crisis of Values*, continuously overrides the underlying "life sequence of value" with little or no account taken of organic or ecological life foundations. Although the rules people collectively live by set their ultimate moral grounds and obligations as a society, no zone of inquiry is so little examined by moral philosophy and theory in general.

In part this is because the individual agent is presupposed as the sole moral subject to consider - an inherited first premise of philosophical method which is itself not examined as an issue. Indeed not even Marxian analysis which is unique in its dedication to change the ruling social order penetrates this level of normative agency. The social value system is, rather, bracketed out by supposition of economic-historical laws that govern independently of human will. Thus the deciding normative order of society comes to be screened out by both its defenders and its adversaries.

#### **3.4.2. All Concur in One Meta-Falsehood: The Ruling Value System Has No Option**

According to the Marxian view, society's structure is not decided by its members, but by the internal laws of productive force development which correspond with and then come into contradiction with the laws of their capitalist form. Revolutionary transformation is, in Marx's words, as "inexorable as the metamorphoses of Nature".

Just as the necessity of the given order is oppositely assumed by others as an eternal given, the Marxian also assumes that the system governs humanity rather than the other way around. Thus for both, deciding how to live at the collective level is not an option. Moral philosophy itself is confined to individual choices. Social science repels value judgments as unscientific. And both Marxism and Capitalism absolutize economic laws over social moral agency - a major issue to which we will return.

### 3.4.3. Re-Grounding Values Inquiry at the Collective Level

Nonetheless the central concepts of moral philosophy apply as well to the social-normative level as to individual agents. The defining markers of a moral order are universalizable principles, over-ridingness of their requirements, and ultimate grounds for ought-prescriptions. The problem has been that this moral choice space is effectively taboo to consider at the level of a surrounding social value system - although it is that which commands the young to go to war, and otherwise controls the lives of its members. Its moral nature and legitimacy ought to be the ultimate issue of moral thought, but is not. While humanity may be defined as the rule-making species - *homo regulator* - this collective level of human responsibility and value system is normally foreclosed.

Yet unlike physical laws or species instincts, the rules by which any human society lives are its own construction through time. They vary widely with peoples and circumstances, and are variously evolved over time. They can advance or regress, enable human flourishing or oppress life capacities, select for human and ecological life security or engineer for spasm species extinctions. Herein lies the ultimate ground of the human species' self-determination, but its axiological space is unexamined - a shared moral choice space of humanity which is mapped in depth in *The Lost Social Subject: Evaluating the Rules By Which We Live*.

### 3.5. What the Organism Wants: Desire Theory and its Fatal Flaw

In testing theories of what is good and what is bad, axiological reason asks one ultimate question. Does the candidate theory have truly universal value bearings and explanatory reach: that is, to whatever is of worth in any domain whatever?

These days, the question is assumed by philosophers as unanswerable. Almost none accepts the possibility of any one universal principle of value. Yet one who does prior to philosophy's turn away from universal values is Ralph Barton Perry (1876 - 1957). In his naturalist general theory, *Realms of Value* (1968), Perry proposes and systematically explains what he claims is an ultimate and universal principle of worth for all that lives. All values whatsoever, Perry asserts, are equivalent to the active interests or desires of organisms.

Perry's general principle of all value is concisely defined as follows: "*A thing - anything - has value or is valuable in the original and generic sense, when it is the object of interest - any interest*" (Perry, pp.2-3).

A value interest is then explained by Perry to be that which is characteristic of the "motor-affective" life of the organism, namely, "instinct, desire, purpose, will, feeling, emotion, motivation, etc.; whatever, in other words, constitutes man as a being who *acts* in behalf of what concerns him" (p. 15). "A thing is an object of interest," Perry further emphasizes, only "when its being sought induces actions that anticipate its realization or nonrealization" (p. 3).

### 3.5.1. The Demystification of Values

An appealing feature of Perry's theory is its demystifying level of analysis. Values are firmly rooted in what organisms - essentially human organisms - want in the world, and are willing to act to get. No philosopher of value has ever put the matter so directly, or so committed his or her criterion of value to an empirically verifiable state. Few have ever claimed the universality of application that Perry does - to everything that can be called a value.

Divine prescriptions, noumenal ideals and deontological intuitions are here left behind. All values whatever are concrete states of animate-life preferences. What economic theory presupposes as the inner impulsions of the consumer to get what s/he wants is here provided with its most developed philosophical justification.

### 3.5.2. The Problem with Desire Theory

The problem arises when one excavates and pursues deeper implications which Perry and consumerism both overlook. Consider the unexamined implications which are no more considered by Perry than the market theory his axiology justifies.

For example, it follows from Perry's universal principle of value that if it is fast motor-vehicles that people have an affective interest in acting on, rather than, say, preservation of atmospheric quiet and the habitats of other creatures, for which people may have no propulsive concern, then it is these former objects which have worth, and the latter, by logical entailment, have *no value at all*.

**3.5.2.1.** As long as value is made to depend on peoples' affective interest in them, how can desire itself ever be limited or recognized as wrong? The more desires there are, and the more they are satisfied, whatever they are, the better life is - even if this "good life" consumes the earth it feeds upon.

At the same time, this axiology prescribes that any value *not* selected for by the wants of organisms counts for nothing - the unappreciated landscape, or the intellectual value that ignorance overlooks, or indeed any value whatever that is not actively desired.

**3.5.2.2.** Such a framework of value cannot, therefore, include the environment or planetary ecology as of intrinsic value unless they are direct objects of desire. On the other hand, Perry's criterion recognizes the "moral status of animals", and accords them such status insofar as they feel pain - that which their interest and desire is to avoid (p.114).

Again, we return to a variant of the pleasure/pain theory of value. It leaves out all deeper values than felt subjective states. It includes non-human animals too, a path-breaking inclusion, but not their ecological life-hosts or non-appetitive concerns. Plato, who regarded appetite as the lowest plane of human being, would be appalled at such an idea of the good.

**3.5.2.3.** This value theory is, we might say, an animal theory of value. Yet it is not

restricted to the limits of the animal in what can be desired. The existence of masses of people getting more and more of what they want, is good in principle for this axiology. Their indifference to the pollution of the air, water and habitats in propulsion by their immediate desires does not count to this value calculus as long as desires impel them to do it.

### **3.5.3. Ecological Blindness in Principle**

The worst feature of this theory of value is that even the value of the unseen conditions which make life possible, but are not themselves objects of desire inclinations, such as deep earth strata or unfelt atmospheric conditions, are screened out a-priori. This is an implication that is no more recognized by Perry than the global consumerism for which he provides the theoretical justification.

Insofar as the first principle of value here refers only to what is actively wanted, the earth and the air are valueless wherever they are merely presupposed, and so too are all other species. “Since motor-affective inclinations” alone guide value judgment, it is therefore compatible with this value system and the consumer ethic it justifies that virtually all life support systems themselves collapse beneath notice with no recognizable *values* crisis.

### **3.5.4. The Fatal Flaw: Theory and System Converge in Desires with No Limit**

The desire doctrine of value which rules in this era has a fatal limit. None can comprehend it so long as they are confined within the circle of self desires as an end-in-itself with no accountability to what supports them. Perry’s value theory, the work of Harvard’s most eminent value theorist, rationalizes the global-market feeding cycle which depletes the world.

This is Plato’s nightmare, classical philosophers might say: but, more deeply, this logic of value can be eco-genocidal in effects with no resource of feedback correction.

### **3.6. The Paradox of Market Success: Magnitude of Desire Objects Multiplies Disvalues**

To constrain uncontrolled individual desires, Perry argues for an “interest inclusive” or “harmonized” agreement of total desires. Can this principle work to solve the problems raised above? The answer is no. Life-serving rather than life-consuming desires are nowhere distinguished by Perry or market utility theory or postmodern desirousness without inhibition.

If, for example, leisure-machine drivers pursue their motor-affective desires in indifference to their filling the world with noise pollution, fumes and disease, the problem cannot be resolved. It can only be made worse by the greater magnitude of the desires all together.

#### **3.6.1. Desires as Market Demand Which Decides Supply**

Neoclassical theory and business doctrine implicitly agree with this value doctrine. People's active desires incite market choices to aggregates of the market's invisible hand perpetually adjusting supply to demand, with more environment-consuming commodities for more motor-affective desires leading market growth. The dynamic "equilibrium" of the market equates to the "harmony" of desires which Perry advocates.

Perry never considers any such issue, nor do neo-classical theory and market doctrine. In accord with the value civilization they express, there is no value ground beyond active self desires and the total volumes of value their desire objects are equated to. What is not observed is fatal. No version of the globally dominant value theory specifies any condition of contributing in any way to the life capacities of any organism, self or all life together. The life-ground disappears, and no need-desire distinction is made. Consequently, strong and reinforced desires for junk food or cosmetics or machine-guns confer a great "magnitude of value" on these manufactures and their consumption. Perry's philosophy and market theory correspond in their value measures.

Conversely, what does *not* serve the reigning magnitude of desires is wrong to this axiology - for example, taxes to sustain underlying life support systems which take away money to spend on self inclinations.

### **3.6.2. Value Theory Based in Fact: Giving Consumers What They Want**

Perry's formally argued text is clear that this definition of value is not only binding in principle, but is as indisputable and irreversible as any objective fact.

Perry writes: "When ... value is defined in terms of an interest, than any interest will satisfy the definition: and if I observe that everyone likes, desires, loves or wills a thing, then I am bound by the definition to judge it as good. The evidence of its goodness or badness is the observable fact of interest, which is just as objective ... as any other fact of life or history" (p. 13).

We may recall here that long prior to Perry, Frances Edgeworth, a founder of neoclassical and market theory, locked the desire theory in by the formalized mechanics of mathematical method: "The conception of Man as a pleasure machine", he asserts his *Mathematical Psychics* (1891), "may justify the employment of mechanical terms and mathematical reasoning in social science". And so it has happened.

Perry's theory seems a philosophical justification of this model. Desire, consumer and market utility theories thus neatly coalesce - scientific quantification of desire magnitudes as all value there is. Money then operates as the demand function to excise any desire without money to pay for its object.

### **3.6.3. How Il-Being Appears as Well-Being**

The idea of value as whatever is desired, and most value by desire in greatest magnitude, can thus become a ravenous maw in its nature. Yet set into matrices of mathematical formulae in maximizing money-capital and commodity growth, only value-adding and no value debits are counted. In this global value calculus, there is no

criterion of worth beyond it. Magnitude of desire objects inducing action to get them is the supreme good.

Illustration assists recognition. Reflect on the fossil-fuel vehicle culture pervading the developed and developing worlds - including “Communist China”. What was once moving volumes of fit and non-polluting citizens filling Beijing’s roads with bicycles is displaced by more and more desired motor vehicles, competition to get them, much greater smog and fouled air to breathe, more severe accidents, and so on. Yet all is counted as “economic development and growth”, the limitless good even in a ‘socialist state’. The generic value-system flaw, however, is not conceptualized. Without standards of what better enables life, there is no end of depredation of life support systems by people going after what they want in ever greater volumes of desire objects.

“What the people want” can also be oil-sugar-and-salt foods serving rising plotted demand curves towards multiplied desires as “objective facts of interest like any other”. With no grounding in life capacities and their needs, the problem of active desires in ever greater magnitudes of objects is accepted as a great good of “enhanced welfare” and “growth”. Yet with no life requirement to ground the regulating value calculus, food cycles themselves can pollute environments and malnourish consumers with no value corrective. Until desire objects inducing action are evaluated by more than popular magnitudes of desire for them, such pathogenic consequences are predictable.

### **3.7. Life-Value versus Desire-Value: The Turning Point of Value Judgment**

If action-inducing desire objects are not connected to organic or ecological requirements, the value of all other creatures and human means of life themselves are blinkered out of the value calculus. Thus so far as people live in accordance with desires alone, systemic life morbidities and dysfunctions may follow but not be seen. Value measure by increased objects of desire is blind to the problem in principle.

Since no “harmonization” between desire magnitudes and life requirements themselves is considered, the conflict between them stays invisible to value judgment.

#### **3.7.1. Grounding in Life Value: Paradigm Cases of Objective Value Choice**

Desire and interest theorists have been concerned to demystify values and reconnect them to people’s own lives. This is fine so far as it goes. Yet there is also a tendency to assume that any other value ground is authoritarian or transcendental. This does not follow. No invocation of any higher authority is required to recognize that the desire-interest axiology overlooks ultimate values internal to the life and flourishing of individuals as well as social orders.

In truth the most important means of people’s lives can be at risk without any “organism inclining towards them as an object of interest”. Let us step back to a wider reflective space of judgment to recognize the problem. Consider the following value claims:

- i. “Human sacrifice is evil even if everyone, including the sanctified victims, is motivated to continue it.”

- ii. “Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’ was of artistic value even if no-one had an active interest in it.”
- iii. “Biological diversity would be of insurmountable value even if nobody desired it”.

According to the desire theory of value, all of these claims must be false by definition because each asserts a basic value which is not inclined towards by any active desire.

### **3.7.2. The Case of Human Sacrifice**

The desire theory of value does not just disagree with the claims above. It rules them out a-priori.

That is to say, the wrongness of homicidal customs, the value of great art that none may have an interest in, and the intrinsic worth of biodiversity people are indifferent to are have no value in principle. The criterion of “magnitude” and “volume” of desires (Perry) and the criterion of “aggregate demand” (market theory) both measure these ultimate values as worthless. Their unifying principle of value is: *The fewer/more who want x, the more/less value x has*. No life coordinates or bearings exist in either’s value metric.

**3.7.2.1.** It follows, therefore, that it is right for people to be sacrificed if the greater volume of people want stone-age rituals or armed wars, or limitless market growth instead of biodiverse environments. By the principle of desire magnitude and aggregate, they overrule human and ecological life. Not even despoiled environments and patriotic wars can be wrong to such a ruling value system if they are dominantly desired.

### **3.7.3. No Line Can Be Drawn Against Life-Destructive Desire Volumes**

If “the total interest” of a society’s individual members is motor-affectively disposed to such practices, they are therefore good according to this axiology. “People get what they want”. There are no deeper value grounds to appeal to. This way of value can thus exclude the most important and far-reaching values there are. Perry writes that “morality [is]- - harmony of [desire] interests as an ideal goal”(p. 87). Market theory adds, “equilibrium between market supply and demand is the economy’s ideal state”. The two claims are analogous in meaning. Perry, we might say, provides a generic axiology for the capitalist market - although he does not claim this.

In any case, in these or any other variation on this value doctrine, no question arises of the enabling or disabling nature of the desires themselves. They are self-validating.

## **3.8. Desire Theory Lacks Moral Resources to Rule out Destructive Addictions**

Let us now consider, as Perry does, the case of life-degrading addiction, and whether the desire harmonization principle can resolve the problem. Perry argues that “while the (addict’s) craving does invest its object with positive value, the craving may be invested with negative value from the standpoint of *other* interests” ( p. 11).

Observe that whether the “addict” must have crack-cocaine, junk food, cigarettes, sugar-caffeine beverages, or violence spectacles is not an issue. As elsewhere, there are

no life coordinates in this moral system to rule out destructive desire-objects in dominant volume. How then are dominant addictive desires to be judged wrong? From their construction as addictive to their saturating advocacy to their mass consumption to their systemic ill-being consequences, there no other moral or value criterion than *what people want*.

### **3.8.1. Equivocating the Meaning of Interests**

Perry's argument for overcoming disabling addictive desires confuses two concepts of "interest" - his own defined meaning of motor-affective impulsion towards something (which impels the addict most of all), and "interest" in the objective sense which he smuggles in here while ignoring it elsewhere - that which is in the desirer's *life interest*. This conflation of subjective desire and life interest is fallacious, but revealingly representative of the wider ruling thought system.

### **3.8.2. Internal Contradiction**

Yet how could a philosopher imagine that the "other interests" of the addict exist for him as felt motivations sufficiently powerful to overcome the addiction, when it is the very nature of addiction to have no other inclinations so strong as it?

Since weaker felt interests cannot negate stronger ones by definition, the argument fails. Only something higher than motor-affective desires can provide life-coherent direction - namely, a life-grounded principle that regulates *against* motor-effective desires when they are life disabling. This mediating moral principle is, however, absent here and elsewhere.

### **3.8.3. The Problem Is Insoluble Without Life-Value Criterion**

We are thus left with the problem of how the addict is to get out of a desire-object addiction which harms life. Or, more broadly understood, we are left with *the general problem of how any destructive felt interest which is dominant can be over-ruled if affective interest is the sole criterion of worth*.

## **3.9. The Logic of Moral Disaster: Freedom and Democracy as Multiplied Wants**

Any theory of value which is restricted to desire-objects is ultimately faced by a ruinous problem. When desire-objects violate objective organic or life support requirements, there is no life-ground principle to steer them because want objects are the sole values recognized.

### **3.9.1. Market Democracy Failures Built into Consumer Value Calculus**

At the second order level, a "greater volume" of felt interests (or in market theory, "consumer demand") is the sole standard of deciding what is of worth and how much. If more and more are moved by toxically addictive desires, this problem cannot be resolved by his measure. It can only be compounded. For ever greater volumes or magnitudes of desires, means ever more value of their aggregate objects. There is in this

generic value calculus, therefore, no reason why such quantities of desire objects cannot override the most basic life support necessities for which there is no felt want.

The larger magnitude of consumer wants decides - approximately the notion of “democracy” in this value system. The unseen absurdity of this position is that it has no principle to recognize the worst possible outcome - that larger magnitudes of desires and desire objects may impel actions which cumulatively destroy what is of universal life worth. The issue here is not abstract in nature. It objectively confronts us wherever there is cumulative despoliation of life support systems by this “consumer-production dynamic”.

### **3.9.2. Despoliation Engenders Desires for Despoliation**

What if, moreover, people’s desires for images and instruments of life-annihilation accompany this globally systemic despoliation? These desires too are validated and empowered by the standard of “desire volume” or “consumer demand”. Indeed they carry more weight as values the more intense and numerous they become in activating populations to consume them. Do we not now see these very growing magnitudes of desire objects widely claimed as “globalizing freedom and democracy”?

There is no remedy possible for this problem within the parameters of this value system. When life desire is made destructive by the forms of expression it is conditioned by, the monstrous can occur by a life-unconscious dynamic operating beyond the ken of market and desire theories (as explained in *From the Beast Within to the Master Desire Mechanism* and *Philosophies of the Dark Psyche: Blind Will, the Id, Archetypes and Inner Compulsion*).

### **3.9.3. The Need to Re-Ground Understanding of What Is Freedom and What is Good**

The worst can occur with no life-value check in place. Yet the rule of appetites with no higher value to direct them receives the response, *and so what?* Perry uses these very words (p.13). At the market-capitalist level, the logic of response is similar. “People get what they want”.

How can moral reason find its way out of this quandary? “What people want” may be destroying the conditions of human life, a fatal paradox that is not resolved.

In the light of the history of philosophy, the desire-interest idea of value leads us back to Plato’s prescient allegory of the Cave - where the chains of people’s conditioned desires and images dancing on the wall determine understanding, thereby blocking out the universal forms of the real, the true and the good. Yet without subscribing to Plato’s idea of transcendental forms behind popular appearances, let us directly consider the problem humanity confronts. The moral re-grounding required here is targeted by a simple question: Do desire-objects and actions to get them enable *or* disable life and life systems?

This is the unpenetrated core issue of moral thought.

### 3.9.3.1. The Life-Blind Value Calculus: Reconciling Values by Counting Wants

In a Perryian or a market value system, the principle that adjudicates among the diverse interests of individuals and groups in society is their aggregated totality. That is, the community's value choice is decided by the majority or unanimous sum of their desires or preferences. The reassuring term for this atomic-preference calculus is "methodological individualism". Since it is recognized that the desire-interests of individuals may lead in different directions, and since the ruling value theory grants legitimacy to each of them, it can only respond to the problem of competing interests by resolving their differences in the aggregated sum of their desires - as with magnitudes of "revealed preferences in the market" or "secret-ballot votes in elections".

3.9.3.2. Whether these magnitudes are only of conditioned or misled desires is not an issue which arises. Preferences are valid in themselves. No deeper criterion of value enters - not of organic need, not of informed choice, not of the common life interest of all. Whether the totalities of desires recognized as decisive by such a value calculus are consistent with universal organic or ecological requirements is, therefore, not a question which can be posed within this framework of value understanding. Rather, idealized models of market equilibrium, harmony of wills, majority rule, and so on are conceived as the only valid guide.

### 3.9.4. No Common Life-Ground for the Common Interest: From Perry to Rawls

Perry's own general theory of value as well as market theory bypasses these deeper moral issues. But his rhetorical representation makes it appear as if they have been resolved. "Morality is an integration of interests", he says, "in which they are rendered harmonious without losing their identity" (p. 92). Such "harmonization of interests", he continues, is achieved by the "organization of morality" in which wider and wider circles of unified, but still individuated interests are constructed as common interests' (pp. 92-104, 262-64, 377-79). The common interests are, however, unconnected to anything but desire magnitudes whose measure of harmony is only aggregation towards consistency *with each other*. No standard of consistency with life requirements and support systems ever emerges.

People's desire-interests, Perry reasons, must thereby move by a "co-operative process of moral judgment" with no content but *agreement among them* towards an overall "harmonious happiness" which is inferred as the outcome of this procedure: a procedure which he then characterizes as "reflective agreement in the social will" (p. 92).

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## Bibliography

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reason as ruler from Plato to Spinoza: “reason is the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (2.3.3.4). This position becomes is a philosophical precursor of market and now dominant rationality which posits rationality as self-maximizing choice of desire objects.]

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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: including the defining statement of “moral intuitionism”, the “open question argument”, and the prototype identification of the “naturalistic fallacy”.]

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requirements or life support systems.]

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

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Scheler, Max (1973), *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 320 pp. Evanston U.S.: Northwestern University

Press. [A representative collection of Scheler's work which distinctively holds that values are objective and unchanging objects of emotions and feelings rather than reason.]

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: an atomic metaphysic of choice to which collective responsibility does not compute.]

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, which argues against any unifying principle of value in a richly learned tapestry of analysis which features the "grace" of love as "bestowal of value" on the love object, the implied source of love's happiness.]

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Spinoza, Baruch (1985), *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (ed. E. Curley), 7 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [Spinoza's greatest work, the *Ethics* is a deductive system modeled 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, from vague and emotional experience through general reasoning to scientific intuition (*scientia intuitiva*) of the logically determined whole from the comprehensively rational experience of it - ultimately the true "self interest" of the individual.]

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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

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", often referenced and variously rebutted in the 6.25 Theme Essay as ultimately the major philosophical movement of the twentieth century, moving far beyond Wittgenstein and his school in its influence (e.g., anti-foundationalism, postmodernism), and decisively disconnecting philosophical problems from the life-ground and the material problems of the world. The *Investigations* features his anchoring concept of "language games", in terms of which philosophical problems are analyzed as basically linguistic muddles, and his earlier logical-empiricist/scientific "picture theory" of language is implicitly renounced.]

M.E. Zimmerman, J.B. Callicott, J.Clark, G. Sessions, K. J. Warren eds. (1998). *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Prentice Hall: London (The most critically wide-ranging text in the field of philosophy of the environment with articles by such well-known figures as Thomas Berry, Aldo Leopold (the pioneer of the Land Ethic), Arne Ness (definitive account of Deep Ecology by the founder), Carolyn Merchant (defining excerpts form *The Death of Nature*), James O'Connor (leader of socialism and ecology movement), Tom Regan, Peter Singer, Paul Taylor (animal rights), Gary Snyder (bio-regionalism), and the editors (covering such fields as ecofeminism and social

ecology).

### **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 20 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.-