

## Postmodern Politics

### 1. Postmodernism versus depth

'Postmodernism' is a term that has been used in many different ways. In philosophy, an important influence was Jean François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* [1979]<sup>1</sup>. This was a rather strange book, in that in many ways it marked the late end of a love-affair between many French intellectuals and Marxism of a kind that – at least from a British perspective - had been effectively criticized in the Anglo-Saxon world in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Lyotard's book, however, did not restrict itself to a repudiation of Hegelian and Marxist ideas about historical teleology. Rather – with allusions to the later Wittgenstein – it was understood as repudiating, with the abandonment of what were referred to as 'meta-narratives', all notions of realist explanation: anything which would suggest that there was more to phenomena than shared social – and thus conventional – practises, and our attitudes towards them.

This was brought home to me some years ago, when I attended a seminar given by Richard Rorty at the University of Virginia. Rorty, in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,<sup>3</sup> offered an interesting criticism of certain kinds of 'foundationalism' in epistemology. But he seemed to me to think – I believe without good reason – that the arguments that he was offering also served to rule out a tentative philosophical realism with regard to the physical and also the social world. The result of this, was that his ideas about social reform amounted to something akin to Charles Dickens' account of the change of mind on the part of Ebenezer Scrooge, in his *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge, readers of Dickens may recall, was depicted as a misanthropic miser – a bit like a practitioner of Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic' without the underlying religious faith. As a result of three unusual dreams – of Christmas Past, Present and Future – he had a dramatic change of mind, and became, instead, outgoing and generous-minded.

Such changes are surely to be welcomed. But there is much more to social life than our attitudes. Society is complex. We have inherited – and have been shaped by – various institutions which it may be difficult for us to change. While some things that we don't like may represent the other side of, or be consequences of, other things which we need to have in place if our society is to work effectively. This is not an argument for saying that we should not recognise what is problematic, and investigate how things might be changed or, if they can't be changed, how problems may be palliated. But more is involved than just a Scrooge-like change of attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979); *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> On this, compare Robin Blackburn's 'Popper and the New Left', *Radical Philosophy* 70, March/April 1994: [https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp70\\_obituary\\_popper.pdf](https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp70_obituary_popper.pdf), in which he explains that Popper was important to Blackburn and his Marxist contemporaries because of his criticisms of 'the deterministic and positivist Marxism of the Second International', of which they also were critical.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

## 2. On the (legitimate) diversity of morals

I have recently been in correspondence with two Muslim friends. They are interesting, educated people. One of them is a businessman who runs a small foundation which is addressing issues of public policy. The other is a first-rate philosopher, with a background in science, but who also has extensive knowledge of the history of philosophy and social and moral theory in the Western and the Muslim world. They were both writing to me about ideas concerning virtue within Islam. I was struck that they discussed Muslim scholars as referring to ideas about virtue, which they took to be shared across mankind generally, and with an older and wider tradition of writing about virtues which goes back to at least Aristotle.

However, they both referred in passing to chastity as a virtue. This is widely recognised as a virtue in the Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> But it is simply not clear that it would be regarded as a virtue at all, in contemporary society. Clearly, there may be reasons why particular examples of unchaste behaviour were thought to be bad. But those arguing for this would typically refer to bad *consequences* which might flow from particular behaviour which was not chaste. It might be thought problematic in terms of the personal development of the individual, for the well-being of others who might in some way be personally affected, or there might be a concern about wider social consequences. It is, I argued to my Muslim friends, just not clear that chastity as such would today be recognised as a virtue or, indeed, as something that is particularly desirable. And this might, in turn, mean that for us to understand the views of Muslims or, indeed, of people from our own past, or literature from such a period, might require education and an act of imagination on our own part.<sup>5</sup>

Such things should not come as a surprise. If we read around in history, sociology or anthropology, or literature, there is considerable variety with regard to human culture and mores. Certain things may be relatively constant, relating to the basic features of human biology, and what is required for the functioning of different social formations. But there are many different cultures and ways of life. To say this is not to say that everything that every society has ever done is, morally, on a par. It is, rather, to argue that we can well expect that there will be differences in our moral judgements across different societies. There are also legitimate differences of opinion within different societies. Even where there are similar judgements about something, we may differ as to the weighting that we will give to them. Issues are further complicated because of different views that we may hold about the consequences of particular things. (It is, here, somewhat amusing that some people in the Protestant tradition have been so concerned about the bad consequences of the abuse of alcohol, that they have made it a matter of religious duty not to consume alcohol. As, for such Protestants, *The Bible* carries key authority, this has led to certain tensions, the most dramatic resolution of

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia notes it as occurring in Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, which apparently dates from the early Fifth Century. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychomachia>

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, who has in recent years written extensively about virtue ethics, has commented that classical Greeks – as distinct from later Christian Aristotelians – did not take humility to be a virtue; see his *After Virtue*, third edition (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 136. See on the general issue of humility as a virtue Mark Button, "'A Monkish Kind of Virtue'? For and Against Humility', *Political Theory* 33, 2005, pp. 840-68.

which known to me being the production of a ‘purified’ *Bible* in which the translator-cum-editor tried to get rid of all positive references to this substance in the book!<sup>6</sup>)

I am not a moral relativist. I say this because I think that we can hope to learn as a result of discussion with others on moral issues. We may also learn that we were incorrect about what we thought the consequences of behaviour of different kinds would be. The judgements that we make in all such discussions are fallible. And I would have thought that there are also difficult issues when, for example, we come across the problem that there may be clashes between what seems to us to be virtuous conduct, and the fact that the large-scale social consequences of such conduct may be problematic.<sup>7</sup> A further problem is this. We may be able to learn from one another that our current views about moral issues, or about how society functions, are problematic. People may simply not realise how hurtful what they took to be simply good-humoured jokes about someone’s ethnicity or physique might be. While the systematic consequences of even slight discrimination, may be significant.<sup>8</sup> Further, there is a trade-off between the legitimate enforcement of morality – even by way of social pressure – and people’s freedom. Some people may find themselves in a difficult situation: they believe, correctly or incorrectly, that they have an important insight into such matters as the religious fate of those who are not ‘saved’,<sup>9</sup> or to the collapse of the world order if urgent action is not taken to address problems of global warming. But there is a question as to the degree to which it is legitimate for people with such convictions – correct or incorrect – to try to force their views onto others. The case of climate change, however, is not typical, in the sense that there, there is both a strong empirical argument that the problems are real,<sup>10</sup> and one is concerned also with actions that people are taking which have adverse effects on others.

If one is dealing with simple matters of moral opinion, however, matters are not like this. Human history is full of moralized panics, in which people have got excited about, and have done dire things to, people who they think have incorrect opinions that are not simple matters of fact. British history is full of ‘popular’ riots, witch burnings and so on. The popular press has a bad history of whipping

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<sup>6</sup> See *The New Testament: A Purified Translation* by Stephen Mills Reynolds (Glenside, PA: Lorine L. Reynolds Foundation, 2000). Compare [http://www.biblecollectors.org/reviews/purified\\_translation.htm](http://www.biblecollectors.org/reviews/purified_translation.htm), and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Holy\\_Bible:\\_A\\_Purified\\_Translation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holy_Bible:_A_Purified_Translation)

<sup>7</sup> An important discussion about this took place in the Eighteenth Century, as a consequence of Bernard de Mandeville’s critique of the Earl of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks*. See Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Bernard de Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Schelling, ‘Dynamic Models of Segregation’, *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 1, 1971, pp. 143-86. For an accessible survey of work by some economists on racial discrimination, Kenneth J. Arrow, ‘What Has Economics to Say About Racial Discrimination?’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12, no. 2, 1998, pp. 91-100, and also David Colander et al (eds), *Race, Liberalism, and Economics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Here, Joseph Alleine’s *Alarm to the Unconverted* (London: Nevil Simmons, 1672) offers a graphic picture of what things look like to someone who believes that the people with whom they interact on a day-to-day basis will go to hell unless they accept the gift of salvation.

<sup>10</sup> There is a recent, and alarming, account in *The Economist*, reporting on research to the effect that the melting of the ice sheet in Greenland has now gone past its ‘tipping point’. Even if global warming stopped, the ice would now continue shrinking: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/08/25/the-greenland-ice-sheet-has-melted-past-the-point-of-no-return>

up people's sentiments. And now, through 'social media', people do this for themselves. What seems particularly disturbing about our current times, is that a lot of people feel very strongly about various moral issues but do not even seem open to the idea that they should listen to arguments by those who disagree with them. But personal subjective conviction does not, in itself, certify the truth of some factual claim, or the correctness of some moral view.

### 3. Rights

Instead of a willingness to accept the fact that issues are complex, and also that people may legitimately hold differing views about matters of concern to them, there is a tendency to treat all sorts of things as claims about people's 'rights'. A claim that something is a 'right' in effect serves to shut off discussion. There is a major problem here, concerning which I hope that the reader will forgive me a short excursion into some issues of intellectual history.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a widespread use, in European society, of ideas about rights. They were typically understood as something which could be derived from a mixture of moral reflection, legal history and ideas suggested by scripture. An important echo of these, was the theme, in the American Declaration of Independence, that:<sup>11</sup>

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The reference here to 'their Creator' is not just an accidental piety. My concern is not with the ongoing argument about the Christian orthodoxy or otherwise of the signatories to the Declaration, but with the idea that God plays a role in the theory of rights to which appeal was being made. While it is not clear the extent to which there was a coherent theory behind such claims,<sup>12</sup> one striking general claim that has been made about this tradition was Jerome Schneewind's idea of a 'divine corporation'.<sup>13</sup> This was the idea that God had arranged things so that, if people developed their ideas about rights correctly, and acted properly on the basis of them, the result would also be the generation of a well-functioning social order. This was something unintended by those people, but, in the view of these theorists, which had been planned by God.

We may be sceptical about the theological basis of such ideas (as, indeed, were some of the American Founders). But this material highlights an interesting problem: that is, the need, in formulating ideas about rights, to make sure that not only are they coherent, morally, but also that they form the basis of a system of rules that makes sense at a social level. If we are sceptical that God has fixed the problem of the relationship between what gets recognised as rights and the

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

<sup>12</sup> See Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and T. H. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Jerome Schneewind, 'The Divine Corporation and the History of Ethics', now included in his *Essays on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

overall workings of society, it becomes necessary for us, when thinking about what should be recognised as rights, to address this issue ourselves. We need, in effect, to re-engineer the ‘Divine corporation’ so that we recognise what is morally significant as ‘rights’ only in such a way that the products of action on the basis of such ideas will work, at a social level.

A key problem, here, seems to me to be that ideas about rights are now, typically, advanced on a kind of free-floating basis, without any thought being given to what makes sense in systematic terms. Not only does there seem an unwillingness to think things through in moral terms. But there is the further problem if we base our ideas about rights simply on what is subjectively appealing: that we may ignore completely what some of the underlying institutional, social and economic arrangements would have to be if these ‘rights’ were to be realized. What seems to me missing – and this is characteristic of a ‘postmodern’ approach – is any feel for the idea that one is dealing with something that is complex, and which has a structure to it, rather than a blank slate onto which one may impress one’s moral concerns just as one wishes.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the problem is the way in which ideas about ‘human rights’ were revived after the Second World War. In broad terms, thinking in terms of rights became less frequent towards the end of the Eighteenth Century, and was criticized – from different directions – by people as different as Edmund Burke, Jeremy Bentham, and Karl Marx.<sup>15</sup> Ideas about human rights were revived after the Second World War. Initially, there was a concern to bring Nazi leaders to justice, in a situation where it could have been argued that some of the terrible things that they did were legal under German law as it stood at the time at which they acted. One subsequently had the production of the U. N. Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>16</sup> A problem about this, was that it was an intellectual compromise between people who favoured contrasting political and economic systems.<sup>17</sup> It is not that the various ideas which got into the U. N. Declaration were not morally appealing. But some of them – such as ideas about an entitlement to paid holidays<sup>18</sup> – simply made no sense within the kind of social system which would be constituted by the other rights. (That is to say, if people are self-employed in a liberal market economy, what do such ideas mean? One *might* be able to give some sense to them; for example, if every citizen were to be given money, raised from general taxation, to be used for such a purpose. But to address the situation in poor countries, would this have to be done on a worldwide basis? If such ideas are articulated just as ‘rights’ it is not clear what they would amount to. While if specific social and political arrangements were spelled out which made sense of them - say, as I have indicated here - it is not clear how much agreement there would be about them.)

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<sup>14</sup> The notion of a ‘blank slate’ here is an allusion to John Locke’s view of the mind as initially a blank slate, open to being written on by experience. (See, for a useful discussion, the article on John Locke in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>.)

<sup>15</sup> A useful collection of relevant material is included in Jeremy Waldron, *‘Nonsense Upon Stilts’* (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting discussion of this, see the ‘Appendix to Chapter 9: Justice and Individual Rights’, in Friedrich Hayek’s *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1973-9).

<sup>18</sup> See Article 24: ‘Article 24. ‘Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.’

The very approach of the U. N. Declaration seems to me a bad one. It is not that I think that people (and also animals of a certain complexity) are not special, and don't deserve protection. I would also agree that international agreement about such things would be good, although I think that we would need to be modest, in the light of social, moral and religious diversity, as to what we can expect people to agree about. But it seems to me that if we were going to attempt such a thing, what would be needed what is, initially, moral argument about what it would seem attractive to accord the status of rights. However, we would then also need to consider: at what cost, and from whom? That is to say, there are all kinds of things that individuals would like to be able to enjoy as rights, and which others would find it attractive if they enjoyed. But we need also to ask: just what actions would be needed, on the part of other people, for these things to be accorded the status of rights? Further, are *these* things that it is reasonable to require of the others involved – and how would all this work? In respect of some things, we might judge: yes: it is clear that they should be rights. In other cases, we might argue that while it is attractive that people should enjoy these things, the cost of providing them should be carried not, say, just by those immediately around them or their families, but by the community as a whole. But we may then ask: *which* community should be involved, and who should carry what part of the burden? We may well conclude that, while it would be nice if people enjoyed a particular right, the burden on others that would be involved would be unreasonable. We are, in fact, familiar enough with such cases. Consider the situation if someone is seriously ill. It would be tempting to say that they should have a right to treatment. But at what cost? Who should pay? And what about the other legitimate uses to which the resources in question could otherwise be put? (It is, here, well worth bearing in mind that resources are typically owned by different people: e.g. someone might have been working hard and saving the money so as to go on holiday, or buy a gift for a friend, and so on.) One should note, here, that as people get older, more and more resources could be spent on keeping them alive.<sup>19</sup>

There is, however, a further dimension to all this. John Locke is justly regarded as an important figure in the articulation of ideas about individual rights and a market economy.<sup>20</sup> But it is important to note that, in addition to what he says about 'life, liberty and estate',<sup>21</sup> Locke also, in *the First Treatise of Government*, wrote:<sup>22</sup> 'As Justice gives every Man a Title to the product of his honest Industry, and the fair Acquisitions of his Ancestors descended to him; so Charity gives every Man a Title to so much out of another's Plenty, as will keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise'. I.e. Locke recognises a right to subsistence from the surplus of others.

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<sup>19</sup> Compare, for an article which is critical of some claims that have been made about this, but which is nonetheless alarming, Eric B. French et al, 'End-Of-Life Medical Spending In Last Twelve Months Of Life Is Lower Than Previously Reported', *Health Affairs* 36, No. 7, 2017, available at:

<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0174>. See also John Gray, 'Classical Liberalism, Positional Goods, and the Politicization of Poverty', in Adrian Ellis and Krishan Kumar (ed) *Dilemmas of Liberal Democracies* (London: Tavistock, 1983), pp. 174–84.

<sup>20</sup> I will not, here, discuss the issue of Locke and slavery: it is an interesting question, but it is not relevant to the particular argument that I am offering here. See on this David Armitage, 'John Locke, Carolina and the *Two Treatises of Government*', *Political Theory* 32, 2004, pp. 602–27.

<sup>21</sup> See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, §87 [I have modernised the spelling]: 'Man being born, as has been proved, with a Title to perfect Freedom, and an uncontrolled enjoyment of all the Rights and Privileges of the Law of Nature, equally with any other Man, or Number of Men in the World, hath by Nature a Power, not only to preserve his Property, that is, his Life, Liberty and Estate, against the Injuries and Attempts of other Men'. See *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); see pp. 23–4.

<sup>22</sup> John Locke, *First Treatise of Government*, §42; see Laslett edition, p. 170.

As I have discussed in my *Hayek and After*,<sup>23</sup> interesting questions then arise in terms of what arrangements would be needed to secure such entitlements. For example, if people had a claim over the property of others – say, their corn harvest – in the event of need, then this would indicate that there would have to be restrictions over what the owners of the corn could do with that harvest. And, indeed, the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson has written about what he described as the ‘moral economy’ that existed, in earlier times, to secure such rights – about how there were obligations not to move grain around; about the way in which some grain had to be brought to local markets and sold in small quantities, at customary prices, and so on.<sup>24</sup> There was, however, extensive discussion, in France in the Eighteenth Century, about whether the consequences of such measures were not counter-productive, in terms of the well-being of the poor. The key issue here – and it seems to me to highlight what is wrong with ‘postmodern politics’ and with widespread attitudes towards issues such as racism and social justice – is that such social issues may be complex. Restrictions on the treating of grain as a commodity, introduced for what seem morally pressing reasons, may be problematic in their consequences. Our actions typically have unintended consequences, and social mechanisms which we may need to have in place to resolve certain kinds of problems, may leave us with new problems to which there is no easy resolution. We should learn from Mandeville that virtue does not always lead to good social consequences!

My point in raising this, is not to take a particular view on the rights and wrongs of the idea of a ‘right to subsistence’ or to welfare. Rather, I simply want to argue that it is one thing to assert that there is such a ‘human right’, quite another to decide just who, if such a right were admitted, has the correlative obligations to secure it. One can then ask: is it reasonable to place such a burden on them? And, further, we must ask what the wider social ramifications of admitting such a supposed right would be. Such issues played an important role in our history and in the history of political economy, and seem to me to be of continuing importance. The idea that there is need for continuing discussion, and that we may not be able to achieve things that may initially seem to us both attractive and morally pressing, however, is incompatible with the sensibilities that inform contemporary ‘postmodern politics’.

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<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Shearmur, *Hayek and After* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> See ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ and ‘The Moral Economy Reviewed’ in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993).