

ANSWERING EMANCIPATION¹

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ABSTRACT: I argue that the objective standing of moral, political, civilizational, and related norms are, essentially, committed to "second-best" convictions: sittlich, partisan, constructed not discovered, consensually tolerable approximations to a modus vivendi among rivals. I offer a post-Darwinian account of the artifactuality of the human person (as distinct from the human primate), who can claim no discernible natural telos in the real world. I distinguish two sorts of norms: agentive and enabling and demonstrate their very different "logics." I bring the argument to bear, for illustrative purposes, on the defense and criticism of liberal capitalism and the upsurge of the opposed values of ISIS.

I.

I trust you will not mind if I begin by confessing my own bewilderment. I can only suppose the conveners of this conference were aware that I often speak in an unguarded way; hence, that in disclosing the main themes of my unsettled grasp of the philosophical puzzles our question will not permit us to ignore may actually capture something of the dawning worry all of us surely share, however diversely. In short, my conviction is that moral philosophy has gone wildly wrong—but not, in the same sense, our moral intuitions.

That, as I shall argue, signifies that we are becoming increasingly aware that a reasonable theory of norms and normative judgment affecting practical commitments—moral, political, economic, civilizational concerns—cannot fail to accommodate in a robust and systematic way the actualités of our historical present and partisan interests. That may strike you as mildly sensible. For my own part, I'm persuaded that it's an admission that should, surely, lead us away from the long-standing habits of thought of academic moral and similarly oriented theories—more often than not confidently cast in Kantian and Aristotelian language.

¹ I must add that the paper before you is a reflection on Charles Peirce's judgment that Kant is essentially "a confused pragmatist."

"Emancipation" itself is a term of art rather cunningly selected to straddle the need to reconcile practical and conceptual demands in a way that nudges us in the direction of one or another bit of prior substantive accord that we may count on without actual labor. I should like to upset, politely if I may, any premature such expectations. I think the stakes, worldwide, are simply too high for the usual skillful insider jousting. "Emancipation," possibly even more than "capacitation" (in Amartya Sen's sense) challenges our ordinary philosophical notions of adequate conceptual closure effectively separated from the salient worries of our day, especially where it appears otherwise.

Our question has its own life and lesson, of course, which we innocently misrepresent when we take ourselves to be the vanguard of an incipiently global community of well-intentioned citizens of the world who may already rightly claim to have grasped and championed one or another infeasible norm of human life, on the assurance of which the emancipation of humanity may be reliably defined—say, in the same spirit of rational optimism with which, cooperatively, we suppose we may disarm all the dangers of nuclear waste worldwide and, correspondingly, reduce the unjust extremes of wealth and poverty in our world.

The trouble is, these two issues (these two kinds of issues) are entirely different, often not even commensurable; and the resolution of the one may not help us with the resolution of the other.

Both require answers of a normative cast, but the norms in question are not at all of the same kind. We need both, but we must keep them apart: norms of the emancipatory or injustice kind are (largely) what I call agentive; those of the nuclear-waste sort or of medicine or logic are (largely) of the kind I call enabling. I insist on the distinction, though it may seem picayune or merely verbal or mistaken, because even if what happens to serve the first function may be pressed into service to fill the second, the functions themselves are essentially different and require very different lines of thinking—very different "logics," as we say.

Enabling norms—logical, causal, instrumental (whether, say, in medicine or inference or acquired skills)—are usually acceptably replaced by suitable non-normative paraphrases that service all our guesses at what the true agentive norms may be thought to be; whereas agentive norms, which we would like to believe capture the ultimate or essential telos of human life, cannot be confirmed beyond hope or belief or conviction or self-deception and cannot be replaced by any form of non-normative paraphrases. They can only be defined (if defined at all) by what, accepting an ingenious clue in Plato's Statesman, may be named a "second-best" resolution: an ideology, myth, invention, consensus, custom, prejudice, life-giving illusion (call it what you will) that we have no reason to expect will ever overcome the sheer scatter of history, fashion, diversity of experience, Bildung, or the hegemonic and contentious tendencies of human life itself. That's to say, we cannot live without agentive norms, but we have no assured way of confirming them: they are forever at war among themselves.

Norms of any kind are, I claim, thoroughly discursive, that is, enlanguaged—hence, also, as I shall try to show, artifactual; hence, also, reflexively constructed, not discovered in any manner open to the kind of testing favored in the empirical sciences. The conviction that we've captured (or approximated) the ultimate logic of human reason in these matters has never shown—and I believe cannot show—that there are, and must be, normative invariances of the right kind embedded (somehow) in the world or human nature, ripe for discovery. It's part of the slim argument I wish to recommend that such a conviction is hardly more than self-deception—a particularly dangerous delusion at this moment of history.

Conveniently, the normative comes in two forms: the agentive and the enabling. The agentive we require prescriptively, being the creatures that we are; but we cannot find a settled answer as to the validity of determining such claims. Agentive norms may be as

compelling as you please, according to our lights; but their affirmation cannot yield exclusionary normative truths, apart from congruities involving enabling values and partisan conviction—for instance, with regard to viability and human tolerance and choice, which, accordingly, must make room for irreconcilable agentive norms that we find we must live with, seeing that we live among diverse societies that are likely to oppose our particular way of life. I take this to be the glory and courage of Hobbes's first concern (as Bernard Williams puts it), though Hobbes would have been more than merely mystified by the convictions of, say, ISIS, which, as far as I can see, might have proved to be the anticipation (on Hobbes's part) of a deeper polemos of agentive options fitted to an unruly world.

I'll come to the supporting argument in a moment: it cannot have been plausibly constructed on empirical grounds before the work of post-Darwinian paleoanthropology, though Plato's Statesman may be read prophetically enough. The human herd must rule itself, Plato suggests, though it cannot claim to have discovered the correct rules by which to do so! I view this as a much deeper finding than Hobbes's. Also, though read along Darwinian lines, it finally leads to the same Heracleitean conclusion. By contrast, enabling norms, precisely because they are paraphrasable in non-normative terms (broadly speaking, logical or causal: that is, instrumental) may be as easily fitted (interpretively) to intelligent animal life as to our own, though animals, lacking language, cannot ponder normative alternatives as such. As we shall soon see, this is a remarkably important finding, one (may I say) that defeats Kant's model of the determinate discursivity of rational judgment at one stroke.

We are, then, creatures of habituation and opportunistic loyalties that typically masquerade as approximations to some changeless order of things. Ultimately, this explains the insuperable paradox of human self-legislation, which, then, obliges us to consider the prospects of a more modest reading of emancipation than our own ardor longs for.

The paradox may be grasped through different formulations. But what it finally discloses is the decisive fact that the very formation of "the human being" cannot be captured in exclusively biological terms: that is, the formation of the human primate simply does not conform to the model suited to the evolutionary account of any other animal species: the human animal is seriously "unfinished" at birth, and its standardly expected, reasonably complete formation requires the lengthy process of artifactually transforming (in good part, reflexively) infant primates into functional persons—a surmise that holds that the final phase of human evolution is already a hybrid phenomenon that disallows the separation of biological and cultural (that is, enlanguaged) formative processes. Where, of course, the invention of language and the transformation of the human primate into an apt person are simply the recto and verso sides of the same process.

This is a hypothesis distinctly bolder than, but indebted to, the conjectures of figures like Adolf Portmann and others associated with the "philosophical anthropologists"—and even Noam Chomsky's still largely biologized linguistics (to judge from his latest analysis of language). I claim, in short, that the analysis and validation of "emancipatory" norms and associated societal reforms (featuring, say, equality, justice, human flourishing) cannot be convincingly pursued without an appraisal of the import of Darwinian and post-Darwinian discoveries.

The upshot is that the question of emancipation, as with other moral and civilizational matters, is profoundly—incluctably, benignly—circular. I don't intend this to be read as defeating our attempts to answer the agentic question—any more than I would be willing to regard the inherent petitio of the epistemological regress to discount the evident achievement of our natural sciences. I hold instead that skepticism and knowledge (or understanding) are provisionally compatible in moderation: indeed, inescapably linked; so that a "second-best" solution of normative matters is inevitably

matched by a cognate modesty among the sciences as well. I call that concession, pragmatism, or an essential part of it—or the main thrust of its most promising contemporary innovations. It aims, not at "the true norms," but at a modus vivendi among disputed norms and functions cognitively in that sense.

We do have our normative convictions, to be sure: predictably, mine are probably much like yours, assuming (as I do) that we've been gebildet by similar caretakers—variants of the liberal tradition of the West. But I'm also persuaded that, even so, I must be speaking as a partisan or ideologue when I advance any first norm of how we should live our lives, no matter what that may prove to be. In fact, I take it to be the unintended lesson of John Rawls's transparent slippage from his A Theory of Justice to Political Liberalism and The Laws of Peoples. He makes a number of different starts, settling finally on his vision of a "decent" people (his term), which he realizes he cannot legitimate, except circularly, unless honest conviction is all we ever need. But would Rawls be willing to extend his gift to the Islamic State? (Somewhere, Rawls acknowledges that he includes the Muslims among his "decent" peoples.) But if he extended the courtesy to ISIS, he would have to deny even the "second-best" standing of his liberal vision. Hence, something close to "ultimate" agentic conviction separates ISIS from ourselves. I cannot see that rational conviction or decency or authentic revelation helps us here, except to sort out congenial and uncongenial convictions—viewed from our own vantage. Stalemate is essentially philosophical, certainly not political. Because war (of one sort or another) is a permanently pertinent political possibility that we can never completely discount. The partisans of moral confidence have never come to terms with the denial of foundational or privileged resources in either the sciences or morality. We discover the ideologies we and others are prepared to live by and with; but we cannot convincingly claim to have discovered which agentic norms are the true ones.

If you concede the point, then globalism and universalism (which are hardly the same) cannot be more than the conceptual space in which emancipation (or equality or the ultimate dignity of the human being or the natural rights of man or any other agentive vision) confronts its equally committed opponents in terms of some potentially irreconcilable strife. I see no way of eluding the verdict, if Rawls's mildly conceded failure applies to every canonical moral philosophy. It's in this sense that we have never satisfactorily answered the frontal question of the conditions of possibility of any discourse intended to confirm the straightforward validity of one or another agentive norm. The Kantian phrasing is as good as any, provided we avoid Kant's own apriorist reading.

Here, other first findings begin to make themselves felt. For instance, the very formulation of the emancipation issue pretty well signals that, faute de mieux, its resolution requires assuming (or approximating to) the primacy of one or another version of the liberal democratic cause, even on the part of serious critics of liberalism unwilling to endorse Rawls's best proposals: Bernard Williams, for instance, or Raymond Geuss or Nancy Fraser or Axel Honneth or Richard Rorty or even Amartya Sen or Thomas Piketty. And, of course, if you admit that much, you cannot fail to find yourself entrapped in the decline of the supposedly confirmable liberal ethic into one or another of the sittlich ideologies congenial to the enabling vision on which a doctrine like that of Rawls's original thesis itself relied. I shall offer a stronger argument shortly. But consider, for the moment, that the emancipatory norm, however noble it may appear to be (in utopian abstraction), may be an essential thread within the contingent practices of Western liberal capitalism that can be shown to block its own realization through one "contradiction" or another.

I'm not clever enough, I confess, to invent an economy or politics to correct what many of us—again, within the familiar (that is, the tested) terms of the known variants of the union of liberal democracy and a capitalist

economy—deem to be largely responsible for the injustices remarked: say, the stubborn but ever-widening disparity between the extraordinary wealth of a very few families at the top of the system, the seemingly irremediable poverty of a growing multitude at the bottom, and the noticeable disappearance of any gradually graded continuum between the two extremes. I'm obliged to ask the champions of emancipation how they can escape the charge of settling for no more than a utopian gesture, if they must address their best proposals to the same culprits they must ultimately oppose.

The divide may be on its way to becoming a structural defect of an evolving global economy in which the rational connection between promissory increases in money and credit (by financial and monetary stipulation) and real income (however construed) threatens to be effectively severed in fragmented and diverse ways that may become increasingly difficult to detect or control in real time, though its effects may be relied on to impoverish the already impoverished, as well as those of the so-called middle class close to the lower end of the range of earned wages, and also to increase the likelihood of ever-riskier extensions of credit and debt that no merely reactive market can expect to escape without succumbing to more and more disastrous collapses. Apparently, if we fail to set aside capital reserves large enough to offset anticipated such crises, we can expect to sustain losses, periodically, beyond the 2007-08 crisis, which might already have compared "favorably" with the Great Depression, if our questionable countermeasures had not succeeded at all.

If, then, you also allow for anticipated and unforeseen large and global accidents—the refugee problem in the Middle East, for instance, the increasing threat of failed states and radical Islam, the incipience of an unmanageable Ebola epidemic, the decline of the world's reserve of potable water, the rise in the level of the seas and oceans, resistance to curbing the disparities of wealth and poverty worldwide, the potential

extinction of marine life, the pollution of our living space, the sheer contingency of abrupt, unanticipated changes in (and the global consequences of) local power and market strategies and the inseparability of politics and economics locally and worldwide—then, even if we ignore specifically ethical questions, the increasingly brittle and unruly economy we now inhabit argues the unlikelihood that the corrective measures we still seem capable of enacting will be resourceful enough (under present conditions) to stave off the increasingly profound, long-term disasters the 2007 collapse is said to warn us to expect.

To read all this in the mildest way, with the question under discussion in mind, I frankly cannot see any non-utopian conjecture that does not anticipate the need to consider revolutionary changes affecting the conditions under which the emancipation issue has itself become wedded to the structural limitations of liberal capitalism.

I confess I'm not in the least attracted to the Islamic State's corrective vision. But its virtue—if I may speak this way—is its utter contempt for the rampant greed and self-deception of the entire Western vision, whatever the West's secular and religious variants may be. ISIS claims to be following God's absolute law—as opposed to man's worldly deceptions—but it itself proceeds (as of course it must) in a decidedly worldly way. I see no reason to believe its conviction is a fraud, though I also cannot see how the world can be expected to remain loyal to such a vision. Nevertheless, ISIS's response is, effectively, a non-utopian counterproposal to the West's market vision—the so-called caliphate—the full significance of which we have yet to fathom. There's nothing comparable (along naturalistic or revealed lines) arising in the West that seriously addresses its own inherent "contradictions." I say we dare not ignore the alien charge, though even that must ultimately be decoded in terms more legible to the Western mind.

Certainly it's hopeless to consider ISIS's charge and claim in terms of its own revelation. It's not a question of its

being stronger or weaker than Judeo-Christian claims; it's just that there are too many agentive absolutes of an utterly undebatable kind to conjure with. I freely acknowledge that, in the aggregate, in debating ultimate agentive norms, human beings are noticeably unlikely to restrict their arguments to the limits of naturalism, though capitalism (including state capitalism) is, effectively, the operative practice and vision of most of the world.

The contradictions of the capitalist ethos are at least as obvious in Islam as in Judaism and Christianity: one has only to keep the entire career of each of these religions in view to begin to grasp the remarkable uniformity of the viable peoples of the Earth. Slavery and peonage have reappeared in force, often in hidden forms, throughout the world, though certainly in the West, where it is usually denied; jihad and crusade are disturbingly similar; and the option of compulsory conversion to the true faith or summary execution of one sort or another, which was once famously enforced by Christianity, is now enforced by ISIS and similarly inspired movements.

Behind the historical gossip, the strongest premises constraining agentive norms include, I would say, the following at least: (i) there is no convincing channel of inquiry—cognitive, rational, instinctive or intuitive, sentimental, revelatory, or otherwise supported—on which the true and ultimate norms of human life can possibly be discerned or confirmed; (ii) the human species has no natural telos that can be reasonably and uniquely assigned the members of the species; (iii) the human species has no ecological niche or Umwelt, or place or function in nature, comparable to that of the regular cycle of life of other animal species, that can be said to constrain in any pertinent way the morally or normatively correct selection of one or another career among all conceivable options; and yet, (iv) fully formed human beings seem unable to pursue their lives without serious or sustained attention to the reasoned choice and defense of agentive norms, which, given the force of

conditions (i)-(iii), I would characterize as never more than "second-best." That's to say, norms that humans find viable or tolerable or reasonable or answering to their apparent interests, under the material conditions under which they actually live.

I account for the validity of items (i)-(iv) largely in terms of the findings of post-Darwinian paleoanthropology and of the developmental and cultural contingencies (historical, enlanguaged) that, in endlessly diverse ways, significantly qualify the unique form of human evolution. The single most important finding confirms that the evolution of Homo sapiens cannot be expressed solely in biological terms, but depends instead on the final intertwining of the processes of biological and cultural formation responsible for the emergence (transformation) of human primates into artifactually formed persons— on the strength of which the human preoccupation with moral or agentive or civilizational norms itself depends. Also, improbable though the facts may seem to be, the "post-Darwinian" argument I favor depends almost entirely on empirical discoveries (prompted by Darwin's theory in the late nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth centuries; so that nearly the whole of the history of Western philosophy concerned with the analysis of human nature in modern terms can now be seen to have been essentially deprived of just those momentous considerations on the acceptance of which nearly all canonical theories of the human and the normative cannot fail to be significantly qualified—that is, reduced in their pretensions of objective discovery, without being utterly denied. The paleoanthropological evidence leads us to acknowledge the artifactuality of persons—accordingly, the artifactuality and diversity of agentive norms: alternatively, the thoroughly ideological, interest-driven status of such norms, within the shared space of other similarly qualified (and potentially opposed) norms and practices.

I venture to say that the entrenched patterns of canonical moral philosophy, pursued most doggedly in our own time by figures like Christine Korsgaard, who

claims to demonstrate that whatever may be salvaged from "Aristotelian" theories may be perspicuously subordinated to the evident validity and adequacy of freestanding "Kantian" accounts, and by attempts like those by Alasdair MacIntyre, committed to demonstrating just the opposite conviction along Aristotelian lines, have simply lost their seeming self-evident objectivity. Once you concede items (i) - (iii) of the tally already rendered, the standard colonizing tricks of academic views of normativity (ranging over every aspect of the philosophy of human nature) suddenly become transparently parochial, self-serving, drab, completely verbal. You may of course contest Darwin's theory; but you cannot merely deny or dismiss the philosophical consequences of acknowledging the rough adequacy of the neo-and post-Darwinian corrections of Darwin's original hypothesis. They oblige us to answer the charge that every would-be attempt to discover the ultimate agentive norms of human life may or must be irremediably delusive—without, however, disallowing some sort of reasoned construction of humanly acceptable norms under conditions of radically contingent history, Bildung, diversity of perceived threats and resources and entrenched convictions. (These are the constraints that confine us to "second-best" norms.)

Theories like Korsgaard's and MacIntyre's cannot satisfy us any longer regarding the legitimation of first philosophy (post-Kant)—hence, regarding the effect of self-evidence of the normatively ultimate. They now appear as conceptual non-starters, once we admit the force of item (i) of the tally already rendered or whenever we admit that the choice of a satisfactory ethic cannot be separated from real-world contexts in which political, economic, and similar conditions of material existence qualify in an essentially local way the rational grounds on which agentive norms may be validated at all—at best of course, as "second-best." In short—add this as item (v) to our lengthening tally—a "second-best" validation of agentive norms requires our avoiding any merely utopian reading of the matter, as

well as accommodating the straightforward accessibility of matched enabling norms (as, notably, in Sen's advocacy of "capacitating" provisions, in opposing Rawls's argument regarding minimal human entitlements).

A second-best defense of agentic norms requires a proper sense of the viability of such norms; and, thus, in existential contexts, it requires as well a congruent account of their pertinently enabling norms. Construed this way—item (vi) let us say—the validity of agentic norms must be at least sittlich, or adapted from the sittlich (what may be called "customary morality": practiced but not evidentially confirmed as straightforwardly objective—unless circularly), prone to being accepted as itself sittlich, if it is not to appear to be merely arbitrary or the result of no more than one or another effective form of rearing or cultural entrenchment.

Of course, as already remarked—an objection directed against Rawls—this obliges agentic commitments to be deeply historied if viable at all, among the singular features of whatever we choose to save or serve or improve within the sittlich. One sees here the clear parallel between partisan enablement and Sen's treatment of the human rights issue in the defense of capitalism, under the terms of championing a liberal democracy. Think, for instance, of the resistance of large banks and states against continually strengthening (always laggardly) given financial reserves against excessive risks (the so-called Basel accords, for instance) in the face of forever-emboldened market ventures in need of inflated paper credits. All of this centers (in my idiom) on no more than enabling norms, without reference to the full-blown question of agentic norms. It's in the context of choosing agentic norms that the post-Darwinian evidence is particularly compelling, philosophically; and, of course, emancipation itself is largely a proxy for every familiar norm of liberal capitalism. In this sense, as I say, even enabling norms cannot entirely escape their being linked to the analysis (and choice) of agentic norms.

II.

My own argument on normative questions depends entirely, if I may propose a conceptual economy, on the reasonableness of a single conjecture: namely, that the human person is not a natural-kind kind, but rather an artifactual, hybrid, though also perfectly natural transform of the natural-kind primate (ourselves) that we classify as Homo sapiens sapiens (interbred, it seems, fairly early in its prehistoric career, with Homo Neanderthalis, now extinct).

That thesis is inseparable from the critique of Darwin's own account of animal evolution, since, following the promising but too hasty or (still) too conservative a biologized treatment of the human person among the "philosophical anthropologists," the Darwinian model cannot possibly account, in any canonically convincing way, for the uniquely baffling features of the career of humankind—which is to say, with the emergence of the novel powers of the human person. For, biologically considered, the evolution of Homo sapiens, including the state of the human infant at birth, may be characterized (if you permit a figure of speech) as "anticipating" its own completion through the iterated mastery of language (among its infant cohorts), by way of the socially artifactual Bildung of its offspring.

Put more simply: it's my conjecture that the evolution of the human person (hence, the effective evolution of the human primate) and the evolution of natural language (hence, the evolution of the novel competences acquired, socially, by human beings) are the matched faces of one and the same evolutionary process, which yields a radically novel form of evolutionary emergence among animals. In my view, this strange turn accounts for the prominence of normative questions among humans—since, as I see matters, normativity is inherently discursive (enlanguaged), whereas animal interests (involving values and valuing, even the comparison of values, even a form of inference confined to the perceptual) never takes a specifically normative form (or does so only in the most minimal degree, in the

sense that the communicative development of monkeys and apes—perhaps, also, of elephants and cetaceans—may manifest only the most rudimentary beginnings of true language in the wild). Given this much, normativity (the application of which requires a developed ability to manage telically qualified processes of thought) must be fundamentally artifactual. There's more to the story that needs to be mentioned, but here, at least, you glimpse the often neglected premise on which the entire matter of the status of moral, political, economic, religious, educational, and civilizational values depend.

They depend, I say, on the ability of the sittlich to fill a conceptual void created by the distinctive oddities of human biology, which (in turn) expose the inflexibility and inadequacy of the Darwinian model when specifically applied to the evolution of the human.

A number of considerations seem particularly instructive here. For one thing, it is most unusual (almost unheard of) to invoke Darwinian and post-Darwinian factors negatively, as regards the determination of agentive norms; that is, as not supporting (in any evidentiary way—indeed, as subverting) the very idea of discovering the true agentive norms of the species. This seems to be the proper lesson to be drawn from the pioneer work of figures like Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, and Adolf Portmann, collected as the "philosophical anthropologists." Call that the "artificiality thesis," meaning by that that agentive norms cannot, on Darwinian grounds (contrary to the usual assumption), be derived in any way from a review of human nature construed in merely biological terms. I freely admit that general enabling norms—for instance, medical norms—may be reasonably ascribed the human species. But medical and other enabling norms are bound to be conditioned by prior agentive decisions or homeostatic or self-maintaining regularities thought to be needed for just about any effective agentive commitment.

Secondly, on Darwinian grounds, the human primate utterly lacks an ecological niche, an Umwelt (all but obligatory for advanced animals), in accord with which

something akin to norms of natural flourishing may be thought to accord with the imputed telos of each species (reconciled with a thoroughly non-teleological reading of natural selection).

If the human species were a standard species (which it is not), then agentive norms might be plausibly projected from the normal functioning of primate life—but not as matters actually stand, for instance in terms of the human neonate's utterly lacking the usual survival skills herd animals exhibit very shortly after birth. Call that the "positionality thesis," meaning, in opposing Plessner's inadequate formula about the human person, that neither the human primate nor the human person has any "natural place" in the world, which we could otherwise take for granted and from which we could derive man's essential agentive norms.

Thirdly, it's precisely the complete, prolonged dependence of the human infant's survival and development on the executive initiative and convictions on the part of mature members of the species (regarding the care and Bildung of neonates) that decides what to count as the agentive norms that are or ought to be in play. Accordingly, their objective standing depends entirely on the commitments of the guardian members of the species, those effectively responsible for the Bildung of children. But these are just the mature members of the species who have already been successfully transformed into functional persons—hence, provided with agentive norms effective for the survival of the enabling society. Call that the "Sittlichkeit thesis," meaning by that that infants are born into societies of already transformed, artifactually hybrid persons, who, in mastering the language and enabled culture of their home society, acquire a grasp of its norms and enabling cognate practices. Here, as is well-known, the decisive consideration is that there is almost no pattern of entrenched agentive norms, favored by humankind, that is not compatible with a tolerable form of societal survival. (This counts, for example, against the rather lame efforts of Axel Honneth—drawing on

Heidegger's resources, for one—to retrieve some form of an ethics of love or care from what Honneth identifies as the biologically grounded phenomenon of "recognition"—the recognition of intrinsic worth, apparently—meant to offset Marxist attacks on capitalist "reification"! I put this thesis in the same conceptual bin as MacIntyre's speculations about the phronesis of dolphins!

This makes a tidy reckoning of the appearance of viable norms. But it makes it impossible to eliminate the heartfelt strife of fundamentally opposed agentive norms, particularly where Bildung includes convictions of revelation. Once you allow religious differences to have standing in the sittlich sense, it becomes impossible to suppose we could ever find our way to a strong convergence on agentive norms—unless by the vicissitudes of war. I take civilizational or religious wars (Samuel Huntington's conjecture) to be a palpable possibility. But if so, then, to my way of thinking, the revolutionary transformation of capitalism as a liberal-democratic politics (very possibly only possible by way of war) bent on controlling the excesses of capitalism itself, may, as we now understand matters, be, itself, an attractive sittlich utopia that eludes us.

I find a philosophical lesson of the first importance here, a lesson almost universally neglected: namely, that there cannot be a convincing explication of the validating grounds of any society's (or any individual's) agentive norms that is not in general accord with the historied interests and ideological convictions of such societies and individuals—or, realistically projected from the sittlich norms embedded in a given or neighboring society's mode of Bildung. It's not part of my theory that this directly yields the right way to determine valid agentive norms; but it is (I believe) the only way to secure their viability and enabling resources, in the light of the evolving history of similarly gebildet societies capable of both oppositional and congruent behavior. It's in such a complex setting—and only "second-best," as I say—that the "objective" standing of agentive commitments can be vouchsafed at all.

Questions of morality and politics, therefore, are more nearly questions of sittlich expectation under the actual conditions of societal life than of relying on the findings of any supposedly independent confirmation of prescriptively objective norms. There are no universally valid agentive norms to be found. All pertinent claims are open to challenge (on conceptual grounds and) on grounds drawn from the relentless flux of history. The best—the "second-best"—resolution of agentive disputes (individual, inter-or intra-societal) tends to favor a modus vivendi, that's to say a modification of sittlich norms already tolerated as reasonably acceptable. A second-best resolution signifies, therefore, that, for one thing, the revision of a sittlich norm may reasonably aspire to acquiring sittlich standing itself; second, that, in doing so, it matches the standing of entrenched such norms; and, third (and most important), the theory confirms that moral and political (and related) disputes are, qua "objective" at all, dependent on the judgment of consensually committed, interested, partisan, ideologically persuaded agents willing to adjust their shared norms and practices, rationally (we may say), in conformity with their prevailing vision of the telic import of their executive form of life. Otherwise, their validating rationales (also sittlich) may require some form of war. I would not regard that as moral failure.

I cannot see how any program of liberally construed "emancipation" could possibly claim firmer grounds than these. I'm perfectly prepared to endorse such norms. The fact that a very large part of the population of the world is fairly robustly committed or attracted to such norms confirms their viability and second-best status. But the days in which its unconditionally "realist" or "rational" standing might have been taken for granted (or deemed to have been convincingly confirmed or seen to be self-evident) are simply gone: the Bill of Rights, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and all similar affirmations are ideological avowals, not established truths or verdicts of any kind. To insist otherwise, I should say, given broadly post-Darwinian grounds,

counts as little more than a conceptual blunder—a dangerous, but also perhaps a comparatively noble, prejudice. We function always as partisans, among societies of diverse partisans. The philosophers of the West have simply exceeded the resources of accountable argument. The correction is more promising, functionally, than may at first appear: it dampens, for instance, the presumption of indefeasible moralities (or laws). It also concedes in a qualified way that the "objectivity" of pertinent disputes cannot exclude the pertinence of the contingent bias of our actual convictions. I'm prepared to argue that much of what we regard as the paradigmatic objectivity of the sciences is hostage to important parallel considerations, that rely, more benignly, on diverse interpretations of our approximative practices. There are prudential constraints on all such disputes that qualify both agentive and enabling quarrels. But, of course, we live (and survive) transiently.

The most profound and compelling consequence of this otherwise quite ordinary speculation is, of course, that morality (and its political, economic, educational, religious, civilizational analogues) is insuperably partisan, historically contingent, responsive to what may be called the evolving "technologies" of our world. Rationally, we cannot fail to support our convictions and commitments as best we can. But we do so with an eye to the competing rationales of all the peoples of our neighboring world. Our arguments cannot be neutral. And the relative objectivity of enabling norms can never be adequate to any would-be cognate demands regarding agentive norms. There is, to be sure, a considerable consensus about possible candidate interests, prudential concerns, the fundamental conditions of any sustained life. In principle, such constraints may be taken, very abstractly, to qualify (always second-best) our rational options along the lines of a modus vivendi (wherever signaled); but plainly, even compromise intended to secure survival may be deemed indefensible. Where is the evidence that verdicts of this kind are inherently evil or irrational? Moralities, markets,

religions are themselves fresh instruments and forms of potential war. I take that to be the most implacable lesson of our time.

Moral relativism, for instance, is not committed to the truth of incompatible norms, but (at least minimally) to the wager that no argument that can validly support the second-best reasonableness of any agentive norm can convincingly disallow a comparable defense advanced in favor of an opposed and incompatible norm; also, every pertinently strengthened such defense invites a matched strengthening of the claims of its mortal rivals. The point is not to dither about the logic of moral convictions but to realize that our world and our perception of our world have changed radically. Changes in the analysis of the logic of moral dispute are a function of what we suppose are the pertinent facts we agree on. Those that seem decisive now concern our understanding of our own nature. And these, as we cannot fail to see, are tethered to the intertwined possibilities of biological change and barely glimpsed new technologies.