

“The point is to change it”

Introduction

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Professor Dave Archard, Queen's University Belfast

We have taken as our title for this collection the second sentence of one of Karl Marx's most celebrated aphorisms, Thesis Eleven of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point however is to change it.' Written in 1845 it was only published after its author's death, but the quoted words are on his Highgate cemetery tombstone. The Eleventh Thesis has also been much discussed, even while its proper meaning has often been misunderstood.

We take it not to be a rejection of philosophy as such. Marx was criticising those of his contemporary philosophers whose work he believed had no theoretical relevance to the important task of understanding and — crucially — thereby changing the world. It is thus not a plea to act without the benefit of theory; it is a demand that transformative political action be informed by theory. Of course, this demand can be acknowledged and endorsed without favouring Marx's historicist view of both theory and the preconditions for change.

Taken then only as the demand that those who do philosophise about the world take seriously what it means to change that world it is an apt maxim. For, normative philosophy — encompassing practical ethics, jurisprudence, and political theory — speaks about what ought to be the case. It surely matters then whether what should be the case can be the case, and, if so, how it could be the case. Why does that matter now? How could such philosophy change the world, and what should philosophers say about this?

In answer to the first question, four different background considerations come into play: the economic context; the political context; how philosophy understands itself; and how philosophy is understood by others. To take each in turn. First, capitalism, despite Marx's prediction of its demise, has survived and flourished. We all live and work in nation-states which are subject to the constraints and pressures of a global economy in which the market is dominant. Politics is, Marx was right at least about this, shaped by economics. That is no better illustrated than by the actions of the major tech and media corporations pursuing market dominance, ever greater profits, and significant political influence. In such a context,

ethical considerations of policy can easily be squeezed out, and whilst ethics of course matters, the voices of those defending its importance struggle to be heard.

Second, the present political context is one of a widespread distrust of politicians, a crisis of liberal democratic governance including the apparent indifference of populations to elections and the disturbing preference of many voters for authoritarian leaders, the rise of populism, the pervasiveness of misinformation and a general disregard for the truth in political rhetoric. These features have been widely noted and variously explained. Here we do not enter these debates but content ourselves with remarking on the challenge faced, in such a context, by a philosophical enterprise that esteems the free exchange of ideas, rigorous argument, conceptual clarity and the rational scrutiny of all claims.

We will say more about the question of how philosophy understands itself. The history of normative practical philosophy in the English-speaking world in the last hundred years is essentially one of a rebirth or rediscovery. In the 1960s ethics was not generally viewed as a proper part of academic philosophy, to stand on an equal footing with metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. At worst the making of moral judgements was seen as something any thoughtful and intelligent person could engage in. Bertrand Russell, the most widely recognised and feted philosopher of his age, was clear that philosophy proper did not comprise moral commentary on any matter. He relegated this to his popular writings for an interested, inelligent lay audience.

At best when a philosophical appraisal of moral judgements was made, they were either simply insights into the good and the right which, without further argument, were had or were not; or they were the expression of emotions, and, as such, not open to appraisal as justified (or not). A. J. Ayer, who would have been delighted to be viewed as his age's next Russell authored the expressivist theory of ethics, sometimes simply summarised as the 'boo-hurrah' account of what moral language amounts to. Moral judgements — for instance, 'Murder is wrong' - on this account are no more than expressions of how one feels about something — 'Murder? Ugh!' — and are not to be thought of as making claims of what is the case, that murder really is a bad thing. Intriguingly, Ayer was the first President of the Society for Applied Philosophy, but principally because of his well-known public profile.

The proper function of philosophy was seen in the 1950s and 1960s as the careful analysis of language, the exposition of what is said and meant, such that confusion is

thereby avoided. It is not to argue for normative principles. As for political philosophy the editor of a 1956 collection of relevant essays commented — a remark endlessly re-quoted — that for now political philosophy was ‘dead’. He meant political philosophy as a grand theoretical enterprise in the tradition of Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau and Marx that addressed the big questions of how we should best shape our political lives together. T. D. Weldon’s *The Vocabulary of Politics* (1953), now largely forgotten, defended the view that all the problems of political philosophy up to then could be set to one side as deriving from linguistic confusions and errors, thereby relieving us of unhelpful ‘metaphysical lumber’.

Everything changed in the 1970s. There was a ‘practical turn’ to a moral consideration of real issues. Nowhere was this more evident than in political philosophy. In 1971 John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*. Now, of course, the death of political philosophy prior to this date can be exaggerated. There were important contributions to political theory — in the English-speaking world from the conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott and from Isaiah Berlin who made seminal contributions to the history of ideas. In Europe, work rather conveniently summarised as ‘Western Marxism’ — writing by, amongst others, Adorno, Lukács, Gramsci, and Sartre — sought to construct a version of that doctrine fit for the political problems of a world ravaged by war, fascism, colonialism, and the survival of capitalism.

Nevertheless, Rawls is clearly of immense significance. He revived the grand tradition of normative political philosophy, not least by putting the idea of a social contract, previously used by Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau to service in an understanding of what a society could accept as fair terms of cooperation. He displayed the virtues of English-speaking philosophy — conceptual clarity and rigour of argument — in defending a comprehensive normative theory. He made ‘justice’ a key concept, and he offered an alternative moral grounding to the defence of his views from that — utilitarianism — which was the dominant ethical orthodoxy. His writing, both the early *A Theory* and his later reconsideration of issues, *Political Liberalism*, has provoked voluminous critical review and regenerated interest in what normative theory can and should speak about.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was also a ‘practical turn’ in ethical theory. In the United States the leading journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* was founded in 1972. Its title says it all. In the United Kingdom, the Society for Applied Philosophy was founded in 1982, and the first issue of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* was published in 1984. These journals explicitly,

assiduously, and self-consciously promoted philosophical work on issues of contemporary practical significance: those of evident political importance such as just war, civil disobedience, discrimination, those of juridical importance, such as the justification of punishment, and especially capital punishment; those pertaining to biomedicine, such as the proper scope of research, the duties of medical practitioner; and those of personal moral choice, such as abortion and permissible sexual behaviour.

In due course, I want to say more about this 'practical turn,' but for now I want to turn to the third background consideration in play when we talk about what practical normative philosophy ought to do now. This is the question of how philosophy is viewed by others. For all the grand claims that academic philosophers might make about its value and proper status, philosophy is one of the smaller subject areas in modern Universities. It is usually dwarfed by law, medicine, and the physical sciences. It has also struggled to retain its putatively essential role in any reputable academic institution.

The problem philosophy faces is not unique within the humanities, and, in turn, this more general crisis can largely be explained by the increasing dominance within the academic sector of an economic model. Universities need to secure sustainable funding, and this puts pressure on individual subjects to show that they can justify their existence in economic terms — by, for instance, showing how their graduates might make a distinctive contribution to the economy, or by justifying their research in terms of its economic benefits. Unfortunately, appeals to the value of philosophy in terms of the acquisition of invaluable critical skills of analysis and argument are not in the context entirely persuasive, and most probably not of Government.

However, philosophy has also been subject to intellectual criticisms from within academia from those subjects that would also offer an alternative theoretical approach to issues. The criticisms are those of practical irrelevance, of an idealism that misunderstands the real world, and — most damagingly — of a radical contingency. To explain this last: English-speaking philosophy is criticised for being the product of and shaped by a particular time and place. It is Western, or Eurocentric; it is modern in an era that has moved beyond the certainties of the Enlightenment. Post-modernism in this sense has been hugely influential within social and cultural theory. Philosophy seems sometimes to have little reply to these charges other than to re-assert Enlightenment values, especially that of Truth (with a capital T) and continue with its way of proceeding.

It would be much better to do two things. The first is to make clear the real dangers of moral relativism, chief of which is the ultimate failure to be able to say anything of real normative power. It should matter that we can say, here and now, that some things are just wrong full stop, and others would be better. The second is to point out that those who decry the making of moral judgements, presuming that they can be defended as correct or incorrect, do themselves make such judgements even if they are not always honest about doing so.

It is appropriate now to say something more about the 'practical turn.' The phrase 'applied philosophy' is unfortunate and unhelpful. It conjures up an unappealing view of what is being done as the application of high-level principles or norms to everyday practical problems. The approach is often characterised as 'top down' and proceeds — at its simplest — by means of what logicians would term syllogistic reasoning. The argument in question uses a major premise which affirms a general truth, such as 'The killing of innocent human beings is always wrong,' which when conjoined with a minor premise that states a factual truth, such as 'A foetus is an innocent human being' yields a concluding moral judgment 'Abortion as the killing of a foetus is always wrong'.

This approach is also pejoratively characterised as 'armchair philosophising'. The thought thereby signalled is that the practical normative philosopher can without leaving their study argue for general moral principles and then acquiring from the relevant expert — in, say, medicine or the empirical social science — those statements of fact that are needed argue to a conclusion of moral judgment.

This view of the 'applied moral philosopher is not entirely unwarranted or prejudicial in the early days of the practical turn. However, things have moved on. Many who do practical ethics both prefer that self-description and engage in what, by contrast with the 'top-down' approach, can be termed a 'bottom-up' one. This starts from the often-complex reality of an issue, understands it on its own terms, and seeks, using both a proper understanding of the relevant facts and a knowledge of ethics, to work up to a moral judgement.

This approach is also much more congenial to interdisciplinary work in which the philosopher analyses and evaluates a practical issue *with* those from other disciplines and professions, rather than simply taking from them what is needed for the minor premise. Nowhere is this more obvious than in bioethics of which I will say more shortly.

However, something should now be said about the distinction in the practical turn between political philosophy and practical ethics. It would be a mistake to characterise the former as one instance of the latter — the use of moral deliberation to understand and evaluate political problems. This is not just a matter of scope — business ethics deals with the ethics of business, political philosophy deals with the ethics of politics. It is rather that this approach fails to acknowledge the specificity of politics — what is the particular and unique character of what happens when we form political societies wherein some of us exercise power over the rest. What justifies this outcome and what are the resultant problems? This is what Aristotle addressed in defining humans as ‘political animals’; it is what Hobbes and Locke considered in contrasting a ‘state of nature’ lacking rule with a society that was governed by law; even Marx had suggestive things to say about how the final stage of communism would entail a withering away of the state, and the replacement of the government of persons with ‘the administration of things.’

The stronger charge — sometimes described as ‘political realism’- of those who draw attention to the special and distinctive nature of politics is that a practical ethical view of political philosophy is simple-minded, naïve, and inadequate to the task of changing our political world. It cannot be that moral philosophers work out what is a better way to arrange our society such that there are, for instance, fairer terms of cooperation, and that the path to making the requisite change is thereby suggested. We evidently need to understand what politics is, how political institutions function, what is and what is not good governance, how laws are made and unmade, and what it means to exercise power.

This is not to deny that we can draw from ethics a better appreciation of relevant concepts like ‘obligation,’ ‘legitimacy,’ ‘power; and ‘democracy.’ However, the ‘political turn’ of some writers in some areas of practical ethics is noteworthy and important. A good example is that of political theorists who wish to give full and proper recognition to the status of nonhuman animals. They have done so by shifting this question of status from one owned by moral philosophers to one that implicates politics, raising questions about who should belong to a political society, how those who are not human might be represented in its systems of governance, and how we as humans should act politically to protect nonhuman animals.

Earlier it was said that bottom-up practical ethics operates best by working with those from non-philosophical disciplines. An excellent example to consider what this means is ‘bioethics.’ As a subject bio- or medical ethics originates in work done by moral philosophers

in the United States at the end of the 1970s. The classic first text is *Principles of Medical Ethics* by James Childress and Tom Beauchamp which has gone through several editions since its original publication in 1979. This famously outlines, defends and applies four moral principles to biomedical practice. Its authors were clear that what they were doing was practical ethics construed as using moral concepts and norms to think about problems, practices and policies. They distinguished their normative ethics from descriptive ethics done chiefly by social scientists concerned with how people do morally think and behave in respect of these problems. The former asks, what ought to be the case, the latter asks what the facts of the case are.

Since the 1970s bioethics has changed dramatically and in four regards. First, it is now not narrowly understood as a sub-domain of ethics, but much more broadly as an interdisciplinary subject comprising law, medicine, anthropology, politics, sociology, psychology, economics, and history. Second, its original focus on clinical practice and research — considering issues such as the obtaining of consent from patient or research subject — has expanded to include, most significantly, questions of public health, addressing such as what kinds of intervention are warranted to ensure the health of a population and what does it mean to think of health outcomes as fair or unfair across a society. Third, bioethics is global in scope. It addresses problems worldwide. The COVID pandemic made clear that some health issues must be addressed across nations and questions of global injustice (in access to medicines, distribution of resources, differential impact of diseases) are necessarily broached. Fourth, bioethics is not now simply an academic subject but a profession, a consultancy option, embedded in committees, commissions, and institutions of health care and biomedical research.

For some these changes have meant a loss of quality, a lessening of rigour, as individuals rush to secure funding to research or to publish on the latest development. Yet, if this is true, the fault can be laid at the doors of those who approve the funding or the publications, not as one of bioethics as broadly construed. Moreover, the following should be noted. It is true that clinical ethics — of both research and medical practice — can be a relatively straightforward matter of using ethical tools to appraise a dilemma that might arise in these areas. Indeed, there are ethical protocols ready to use by a relevant body, such as a clinical ethics or research committee. The same is not true of the adoption and implementation of laws, regulations and policies, in respect of new developments in medical and biological technology.

Here there are questions not simply or only of what might be ethically permissible, but also of what might be feasible laws, what might be broadly acceptable to the public, what would facilitate scientific research of sufficient value, and what could command the support of Government. The work of Mary Warnock in chairing the committee whose final Report on the matter of fertility treatment and embryo research led to the creation of the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority is exemplary in this regard. She laboured conscientiously and diligently to make proposals that were both philosophically respectable (even if she did not persuade every philosopher of this) and had a good chance of making it into appropriate legislation.

Here the bioethicist cannot work alone (and least of all seated in an armchair sequestered in their study) to produce good outcomes. They must work with those who appreciate what generates disagreement on a proposal and why, what will satisfy the requirements of good law, and how to engage with the public both to consult and to inform. Above all the function of bioethics is to advise and recommend, not to dictate. Here in the United Kingdom the Nuffield Council on Bioethics offers an excellent instance of what is possible. Over the years it has produced consistently high-quality reports on all the major developments in bioscience, such as gene editing, as well as the social and political context of health policy, such as on the issue of an ageing population or the design of public health interventions. It has commanded the respect of the public, and always got the ear of successive Governments. Notably it is a Council *on* bioethics and not simply *of* bioethicists.

We are brought then to the question, which follows from this discussion of bioethical law and policy and which opened this Introduction, namely what can and should be said by those who do normative practical ethics about what might and could be the case.

We can start at the beginning — in terms of philosophy literally so — with Plato, whose *Republic* argued for rule by the wise, that is philosophers. For Plato, the question of what a good political society is can be answered by a simple statement: the political good of all is best served by having as rulers those who know what is best. These are philosophers who, moreover, will rule in the interests of all and not of themselves because as philosophers they will act from duty and not desire for personal advancement or for selfish reasons.

No-one now would endorse this proposal even if some autocrats might judge themselves to be philosophers. However, Plato challenges the democratic principle whereby all should

participate in some form in the exercise of political power by suggesting that the rule of many is evidently inferior to rule by the incorruptible and sagacious few. The alternative to democracy is *epistocracy*, rule by those in the know.

What exactly is wrong with epistocracy? Some plausible answer is needed if only because if it is not wrong there is a ready defence of what normative philosophers might do to change the world, namely simply rule the non-philosophical majority. It helps to distinguish between the possible replies, and of course some combination of them is possible. First, democracy will be defended not in terms of its outcomes, which we can agree may be stupid or vicious laws, but by its foundation in a principle of equality. Yet, that answer invites other questions, for the scope of citizenship does not extend to everyone subject to the laws of some state. Children, prisoners and the insane are conventional exceptions. And with children at least we seem to have an epistocratic reason for their exclusion, namely that they are not able to understand what it means to be a citizen and know what is involved in voting. However, if children are excluded for this reason, why not many adults who we could reasonably, and regularly, judge do not understand what is at stake in any election?

The case of children is also a way of answering a second response to Plato's anti-democratic argument, namely that there is no such thing as the expertise he thought warranted philosophers' rule. For we can surely say that we know who does not have the required expertise and that presumes we have at least some sense of what that is.

We might respond to Plato's challenge to democratic rule by saying that even if there is expertise of the relevant kind, we cannot reliably and certainly identify who has it. That has some plausibility, but if philosophers do not have it, who else could be a plausible candidate? Of course, we might even concede that not only philosophers have it, but that still allows that at least they do.

A final response to Plato is that even if there is expertise of the relevant kind, and even if those who have it — such as philosophers — can be reliably identified, they should not exercise it. In the personal domain — consider the agony aunt's reply to the troubled friend of the unfaithful wife who worries whether they should tell the husband the truth — the conventional response is that moral expertise should not be deployed because it vitiates the choice of the person advised and it is the making of that choice which gives it its moral worth.

However, are matters as clear in the case of political rule? Here it might be said that the exercise of expertise subverts democracy by taking away from citizens the empowering and educating choices they have otherwise to make. Yet, it would surely make a difference how much is left to the ethical experts, and it seems far-fetched to think that the delegation of some law and policy choices to such experts would undercut democratic governance, especially if the delegation was democratically made (‘We the people give you the philosophical few the power to make these decisions’), and if the scope of such delegated powers was carefully delimited.

If normative philosophers are not Plato’s rulers, then might they at least offer advice? In the history of the subject there have been philosopher-advisers. Aristotle taught Alexander the Great; John Locke advised the Earl of Shaftesbury and suffered exile in Holland for his pains. In the modern era philosophers have been official advisers in their role on Government committees and commissions. Bernard Williams chaired a Committee on obscenity and film censorship; Mary Warnock, as noted earlier, chaired committees on special education and, most famously, on fertility treatment and embryo research.

Yet we need not appeal to these kinds of example. Indeed, we could represent publications in normative practical ethics as advisory in character. After all, an article arguing that, for instance, assisted dying is morally permissible, amounts to advice to law makers that it should be legally permitted or decriminalised if currently something that is prosecuted. We could say this whilst recognising the important differences between law and morality. If such work can be interpreted as advisory, then there are evidently obligations on their authors. For advice can be bad in at least two ways: first, *what* is advised may be bad and harmful; or, second, *how* the advice is offered may be poor — for instance, by being open to dangerous misinterpretation or being unclear in what exactly it commends — such that what is done as a result is bad and harmful.

Normative practical philosophers may well protest at this point — and some have — that all of this goes far too far. There need be no false modesty on the part of philosophers who say something along the following lines, ‘It is no part of what we do as practical philosophers to recommend that the world should be a certain way, and it is certainly not incumbent on us to show how the world might be changed. Least of all should we be charged with the responsibility of making those changes.’

In fact, normative practical philosophers may well say some of the above. They might, for instance, argue that although they do make recommendations for improving the world, it is for others to show how that could be managed in the real world. This suggests a possible division of labour — between the architect or designer of the beautiful edifice and the builders who will erect it. However, whilst there is a distinction between being the builder and the architect, there is surely an obligation upon the latter to show that the building could be built. Those who argue for what ought to be the case must be sensitive to criticism that, since ‘ought implies can’ (something should be the case only if it could be), they are able to show that what they recommend is possible.

This criticism often comes in the form of a characterisation of contemporary practical normative philosophy as idealistic, other worldly, abstracted from the brutal realities of the world, and as such unlikely to have any influence in and on that world. The criticism deserves to be answered.

To Rawls is owed a first response, namely that a distinction can be drawn between an ideal theory of justice in which the preconditions for an ideally just society, such as the dispositions of its citizens to support and live by the principles of justice, obtain, and non-ideal theory when they do not. However, non-ideal theory is not developed in his writing, albeit much subsequent work, influenced by Rawls’ distinction, has been devoted to spelling out exactly what is meant by non-ideal.

Equally, and in the same vein, a lot of work has been published on what might be meant by saying that a normative theory is feasible or realistic. However, none of this offers an elucidation of a feasible or non-ideal state of affairs. Thus, it might make more sense simply to borrow from economists the idea of sub-optimal outcomes and then address the question — using examples — of what the best sub-optimal state of affairs might be in any particular case. For instance, take an ethically contentious issue, such as assisted dying, climate change, gender identity, the categorization of sexual offences, the sale and use of ‘soft’ drugs, or the age of criminal responsibility. In the absence of a consensus or overwhelming majority in favour of the optimal proposal or faced with the evident unwillingness of a government to legislate as ideally desired philosophers might suggest what could be done that is better than exists if not the best they would wish for in the best of all possible worlds.

Some — the work of Amartya Sen is exemplary in this regard — will argue that we do not even need ideal theory. We do not have to know what is the best in order to identify what is better or worse. We can address injustice — and take steps to ameliorate or eliminate instances of it — without spelling out and defending what would be perfectly just. Such an argument will not persuade those who think that we do need principles or standards by which we can make comparative judgements of better or worse; and that these presume or can be appreciated only by an appeal to ideals.

The debates about non-ideal theory, what it means to say that a normative theory is 'feasible' (what is presumed about the world and about human nature), make a difference to the kinds of normative theory that are and can be done. Nevertheless, it must remain incumbent on practical normative philosophers — those who argue and write about what ought to be the case — to recognise what is owed to their audience in the way of an exposition of what could be the case, and what that would involve. Otherwise, Marx's ghost will remind them that they have missed the point of doing such theory, that of changing for the better the world they otherwise only interpret.