

# Rewedding morality to modern society

by Warren A.J. Hamerman

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## Moral Philosophy and Social Ethics

by Dario Composta

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This remarkable book by one of the world's most learned and creative thinkers on the subject of natural law was intended to aid the study of the neglected area of classical moral philosophy originating from the Greek masters and passing through Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine. The author clearly demonstrates why this classical tradition is superior in all respects to various pessimistic systems of contemporary thought from René Descartes to Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud.

Dario Composta was formerly the dean of the Philosophy Faculty and is currently the vice rector of the Vatican's Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He is the author of numerous essays and articles, among them "The Theology of Natural Law," "Nature and Reason," and "Work and Liberation."

In this work you will find a clear presentation of the common fatal philosophic flaw in both the liberal economics of Adam Smith and the communist dogma of Karl Marx. They each discount morality of every unique person—all with equal dignity as God's children—as a necessary feature of how modern society operates. Instead, events are ruled by "objective forces," such as class struggle or the market laws. In either instance, the "results" justify "the means."

In Marxism, morality is abolished in favor of economic structure, or full materialism. Lenin, at the Third Congress of Communist Youth in Russia in 1920, said: "We do not believe in an eternal morals and denounce all the fables concerning morals. . . . Our morals are completely subordinated to the interests of the class struggle and of the proletariat." In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx himself wrote that his system "abolishes eternal truths, religion, and morals so as to make room for a new form."

Similarly, in the major philosophies of liberal capitalism,

such as the sociological school founded in the last century, personal morality is secondary to the "society." Such an outlook recognizes that the good is "what prospers," no matter what its moral substance or effect on others. This reduces itself in economic practice to a deregulated Hobbesian jungle where "anything goes." The brutishness of this system is justified through a series of modern philosophies—the positivism of Auguste Comte, the neo-positivism of the Vienna Circle of Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein and its offshoot in the Chicago School of Carnap, the sociologism of Durkheim, the structuralism of Claude Levy Strauss, and the psychoanalysis of Freud. They all reduce the significance of the individual's own moral choice. The moral "fact" is not "interior" in a unique human being but depends on society. Thus, personal ideas on morality are mere stereotypes "acquired" from the social environment.

## Moral life

While the book was intended for use in university study, the author clearly establishes that every man and woman is involved in the subject of moral philosophy whether or not they are conscious of it. Each and every person has varied personal experiences with determined religious, educational, social, aesthetic, psychological, and moral depth, and these form the basis of clear choices and decisions through life; for instance, whether to marry or not. Thus, Composta concludes: "Man's spirit could be viewed as a scenario in which the dramas are not spectacles to enjoy, but events involving the person himself. It is the task of moral philosophy to try to understand in depth this (sometimes dramatic) *life* and to become *moral science*."

In fact, the very study of moral philosophy encourages the asking of universal questions, such as:

Does the moral fact belong only to me, or to all men?

Does good depend on my tastes, on my culture, on my familial or national education, or on more profound reasons?

Does the moral act depend on the voice of conscience, or on the call of the dignity of the person?

Are my morals different from those of my peers, from those of other nations and continents, or do universal human morals exist?

Am I free or not, because I act according to the moral norm?

Is interior freedom in harmony with exterior moral norms?

Do I live morally for my own happiness (almost as if morals were a technique of spiritual pleasure), or do I live morally for a higher goal?

Dario Composta teaches that how one answers these questions will lead to one of four forms of destiny before both civil and religious politics:

"a) the destiny of the human person who isolates himself from the civil and the religious community. We shall call this project of life 'apolitical'; b) destiny of the human person

who realizes himself only in the civil community; we shall call this destiny 'politicized'; c) destiny of the human person who realizes himself only in the religious community; we shall call this destiny 'sacral'; d) destiny of the human person who realizes himself in the various subordinate hierarchical communities: the family, associations, the religious community, the state. We shall call this destiny 'normal.' ”

### **False solutions**

Among the philosophies which Dario Composta analyzes as false solutions to morality are those of Kant (1724-1804), Hegel (1770-1831), Comte (1798-1857), Kierkegaard, and Sartre.

Because of his enormous influence in shaping the Enlightenment and belief structure of economic liberalism, and our limited space, I would like to report only some of the features of the author's attack on a single philosopher—Immanuel Kant.

While Kant put forth rationalism mixed with religious pietistic ideals, he could not locate the creative freedom in each individual person. Dario Composta writes:

“For Kant morality—that is, the good or evil of the voluntary action—does not depend on factors external to the person (God, the material world), but on the person himself; but, Kant rejects that moral rectitude depends on the person as a being in the world. . . . The person is a substance among all the others and cannot be known in his metaphysical entity. So, the only thing remaining are human acts; but, Kant *rejects the emotions, impulses, and tastes*; being variable, they cannot establish universal rapports such as those of morals.”

Since Kant does not believe in good acts for their own sake, he does not recognize the Christian conception of charity as an efficient force in society. It is not “good will,” but “duty,” which mechanically bounds the individual. What are necessary are *categorical imperatives*:

“What for Kant represents the mechanical, instinctive non-moral elements is of an anthropological order and derives from the inferior impulses of man; morality arises from the practical reason as duty and imperative.”

Dario Composta offers as a positive alternative to such dreary outlooks the classical tradition of natural law. The foundation of morality must be found in the author of human nature, who is God. Thus natural law (*lex naturalis*) is a participation in the eternal law of God.

In pagan systems, man's work is reduced to the equivalent of a beast of burden, in contrast to Christianity which ennobles man's work as a projection of the creative acts of God.

Composta's work is a systematic presentation of the subject divided into two parts: “Fundamental Ethics” and “Social Ethics.” He also provides three valuable appendices—one on “Communist Morals,” a second on “Hebrew Ethics and Greek Ethics,” and a third on the “Specificity of Christian Ethics.” It contains a rich listing of suggested further readings

as well as valuable end notes for those stimulated to pursue the subject.

This book will give the reader deep insights into how to restore morality to economics, science, and government. Readers will find particularly timely his discussion of the interrelationship of Justice, Peace, and Economics, from a traditional Christian standpoint. Although his work was not intended to be “topical,” it is precisely relevant to understanding the current simultaneous breakdown of both the Marxist and Adam Smith economic systems.

## **Peter Sellars puts the soap in Mozart's operas**

Imagine Roseanne Barr choosing to assault the National Anthem with her own peculiar body language and gestures. Now transfer and enlarge this image so that Roseanne is put in charge of the most widely circulated performances in the United States of three Mozart operas, for the Mozart Bicentennial celebrations.

*Voilà!* In the simplest and least painful way, you have the secret of what Peter Sellars calls his productions of the Mozart operas, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*, widely being shown on the Public Broadcasting System currently. Deliberate and premeditated ugliness.

The only difference is that most Americans didn't feel they had to swallow Roseanne's interpretative creation. However, the guardians of our national culture, our art critics, haven't allowed themselves any such healthy responses. Rather, they prefer hiding behind such phrases as “interesting,” “new dimensions,” *ad nauseam*.

Does one have to take seriously Sellars's claim about making Mozart relevant to modern-day, soap opera America? If so, much time and noise could be spent showing how Sellars's “translation” of Mozart goes beyond interpretation, beyond recognizable distortions, to outright fraudulent misrepresentations. Roseanne Barr's National Anthem, by comparison, was a model of faithfulness. It seems, however, that Mr. Sellars has succeeded in translating one 18th-century concept: “*enfant terrible*” comes out rather clearly as the “terrible infant.”

You might have known: Some people's idea of the proper commemoration of Mozart's premature death is to assassinate him all over again.—*David Shavin*