Towards a sociology of global morals with an 'emancipatory intent'

ANDREW LINKLATER*

Abstract. First generation Frankfurt School critical theorists argued that global solidarity was possible because human beings have similar vulnerabilities to mental and physical suffering. This approach to solidarity remains significant for any discussion of the ethical aspirations of critical theory. It also has ramifications for efforts to develop a sociological approach to global moral codes which is influenced by the idea of an emancipatory social theory. Informed by certain themes which were developed by Simone Weil, this article draws on the writings of Fromm, Horkheimer, Adorno and Elias to consider how a sociology of international moral codes can be developed. One of the aims of this project is to consider how far global moralities have developed forms of solidarity around the recognition of shared vulnerabilities to mental and physical suffering which are part of the species' biological legacy.

Numerous thinkers have denied that the idea of shared humanity can provide the philosophical foundations for a cosmopolitan ethic, and many have rejected the belief that appeals to humanity will ever compete with the emotional attachments and the established norms of specific communities in determining human conduct.[1] But the idea that common humanity has profound ethical significance is not entirely friendless in recent moral and political theory. Gaita has drawn on Simone Weil's writings to defend an ethic of human concerns which is, in some respects, more fundamental than the social moralities which usually shape individual and group behaviour.[2] The central aim of this article is to link this idea with the notion of a sociology of global morals with an emancipatory intent. The principal objective is to build on previous endeavours to construct a mode of comparative sociological analysis that examines the extent to which basic considerations of humanity have influenced the conduct of international relations in different historical eras and may yet acquire a central role in bringing unprecedented levels of global connectedness under collective moral and political control.

The article begins by summarising Weil's thesis, noting that it raises significant problems for 'communitarian' arguments which deny that representative moral

---

[1] See David Hume's that 'there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such', in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 533, and the reservations about cosmopolitan motivation in Michael Walzer, 'Spheres of Affection', in Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*? (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002).
[2] Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2002).

agents are motivated to act from considerations of humanity. The key contention is that Weil identifies certain humanist dispositions, which have probably existed to some degree in all or most times and places, and which have long contained the possibility of radically enlarging the moral and political boundaries of community. The second section identifies affinities between Weil's doctrine of humanity and critical-theoretical claims that common vulnerabilities to mental and physical suffering provide the most secure foundation for solidarity between strangers. This position has special significance for the task of reconstructing historical materialism and redirecting the course of the critical theory of society. Developing this theme, sections three and four consider the implications of these remarks for a sociology of global morals which analyses the extent to which the most basic forms of human solidarity have influenced international relations in different eras and may yet prove to be decisive in shaping the evolution of the species as a whole.

Universalisable sympathies

Weil maintained that a person stranded in the desert, but possessing ample water, would normally be expected to assist a stranger who was facing death because of thirst. Most moral agents, Weil observed, would assume that considerations of humanity would make rescue 'automatic'; in the circumstances, there would be no request for an explanation of the decision to assist. By contrast, most observers would think an explanation was called for, 'if having enough water in his canteen (the potential rescuer) simply walked past, ignoring the other person's pleas'.[3]

Weil maintained that the obligation to assist reflected a belief that the dignity of other persons can only be respected through efforts to deal with 'earthly needs'; and on this matter, she proceeded to argue, 'the human conscience has never varied'.[4] The extent to which her theologically-grounded empirical claims about human responsiveness to threats to survival can be generalised across human history is an interesting question. It seems reasonable to suppose that the anthropological record reveals great cultural variations with respect to ethical commitments to 'Good Samaritanism'; it may also show that displays of solidarity towards the members of other communities have often been actively discouraged or regarded as morally reprehensible or judged to warrant severe punishment. In many societies, persons in the circumstances which Weil described may have ignored the plight of strangers on the grounds that their ethnicity, colour, enemy status, sacrilegious beliefs or whatever condemned them to perish. But it will have been noted that Weil did not insist that humanitarian assistance will always be automatic in the desperate conditions she described, or believe that other social actors must always be so astonished by the

---

[3] See Raimond Gaita, 'Critical Notice', *Philosophical Investigations*, 17 (1994), pp. 616ff, and the discussion in Gaita, *Common Humanity*. Similar sentiments are present in the claim that: 'To no matter whom the question may be put in general terms, nobody is of the opinion that any man is innocent if, possessing food himself in abundance and finding someone on his doorstep three parts dead from hunger, he brushes past without giving him anything'. See Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 6.
[4] Weil, *Need for Roots*, p. 6 where she describes this obligation as 'eternal'.

failure to assist as to feel compelled to request an explanation. But if help has been virtually automatic or widespread in various encounters with 'outsiders' over the millennia, and if failures to assist have often led to bemusement, astonishment, indignation or disgust, then rather more might be said for the ethical importance of considerations of humanity than the critics have recognised.

Weil's argument can be modified in ways that consolidate her claims about the most basic forms of solidarity between strangers. One might ask if it would not seem odd if a person who is facing death because of a lack of water failed to ask or implore a passing stranger to help on the grounds of the invisible ties of common humanity. Here one must also allow for important exceptions. In some societies, such pleas may be regarded as violating cherished social norms, as bringing dishonour to the group, as risking cultural pollution or some such thing. Unbroken traditions of hostility and warfare may often have led to decisions not to place the self at the mercy of an alien other. In such circumstances, the decision to withhold the request for assistance may not prompt requests for an explanation.

Scepticism about the motivational power of common humanity is weakened significantly if at least some human beings in different historical eras have thought it was right to help a stranger in the circumstances described, if others have endorsed their course of action, and if they have sanctioned the failure to rescue. Distrust of the ties of humanity is dented if certain basic forms of solidarity with the suffering led at least some moral agents to assist others more or less automatically in different historical eras. Empirical evidence of levels of attachment to Good Samaritanism over time is unavailable, but it does not seem preposterous to speculate that complete strangers have been compelled to act by the ties of humanity in very different times and places. If this is right, and as already noted, then there is more to be said for the ethical significance of shared humanity than 'communitarian' objections to cosmopolitanism have allowed.

Weil's thesis raises several interesting claims about moral agency if it is the case that certain sympathies have been extended to strangers in the circumstances described in many historical epochs. First, the potential rescuer and the endangered do not have to belong to the same moral and political community to participate in the imagined ethical encounter. Second, the ethical exchange does not presuppose the capacity to communicate in the same spoken language. These points will be extended in a moment but, before doing so, it is important to stress what the encounter does presume, namely the existence of universally intelligible expressions and gestures, and a shared emotional vocabulary, which make it possible for the members of radically different groups to communicate distress to each other and to respond sympathetically. Given the significance of emotions such as empathy and sympathy for solidarity between strangers, it is worth pausing to note that, from Darwin to Ekman, analysts of the role of emotions in human behaviour have argued that all human beings possess a similar repertoire of facial expressions denoting fear, anger, joy, distress *et cetera* which ensure intelligibility between groups which are otherwise separated by differences of language and culture.[5] Various debates surround the question of whether, or how far, basic emotions such as fear are 'hard-wired', but Weil's argument which assumes that certain emotional responses to suffering will be

---

[5] Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Face and Feelings* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), ch. 1.

automatic invites consideration of the claim that certain ethical potentialities have long been immanent within a universal vocabulary of moral emotions.[6]

The ability to communicate distress to another, and capacity to recognise suffering, are clearly essential if the Weilian 'primordial' ethical encounter is to occur, but they are not sufficient conditions. A complete explanation must include references to the rudimentary emotions of empathy and sympathy, emotions which can be usefully linked with Bentham's thesis about the centrality of sentience for the moral life. In a famous passage on the grounds for being moved by animal suffering, Bentham maintained that the central question is not whether the animal can speak or reason but whether it can feel pain and has the capacity for suffering. Sympathy for sentient creatures which are all condemned to feel pain and to suffer to some degree was at the heart of morality in Bentham's judgment.[7]

Just as the decision to assist a non-human animal does not assume the equality of human and non-human species, so the decision to help a stranger from another social group need not rest on a doctrine of the equality of all persons – or rather it need only recognise their equality to a very limited extent. Pragmatic considerations which have little or no place for a doctrine of equal rights can be the spur behind assistance; but if the 'Weil thesis' is right, there is often more to help than simple prudential calculations.[8] The main point to make is that the bonds and attachments between strangers may rest entirely on the almost universal experience of being similar to, but not necessarily equal with (or identical to) others, and in being exposed as part of one's biological heritage to similar vulnerabilities to mental and physical suffering. It is striking that some of the earliest formulations of the defence of cosmopolitanism in Western moral and political theory grounded the perspective in such universal vulnerabilities of the body.[9] This is hardly extraordinary given that mutual recognition of shared mental and physical vulnerability provides the most readily available means of projecting forms of solidarity across the boundaries of established communities – and across the boundaries that are deemed to exist between human and non-human forms of life.

It was noted earlier that the strangers in the 'Weilian condition' need not belong to the same community or speak the same language before they can engage in crucial moral encounters. One might extend the point by adding that no sophisticated 'labour of translation' is required to steer agents towards a Gadamerian fusion of ethical horizons.[10] Nor is any great process of societal rationalisation needed in which cultures transcend egocentric or parochial world-views and embrace highly abstract, post-conventional ethical dispositions – even though it is the case that transcendent religious perspectives have often been the social force that has led human beings to

---

6 In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 169, Martha Nussbaum maintains that 'biology and common circumstances . . . make it extremely unlikely that the emotional repertoires of two societies will be entirely opaque to one another'.

7 Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Darien, CT: Hafner), pp. 311ff.

8 Gaita, *Common Humanity*, p. 276 notes that a slave-owner might assist a slave in desperate circumstances, but in this case assistance does not rest on a doctrine of equal rights. The desire to protect another slave-owners' property, rather than human solidarity, may prompt an act of rescue.

9 See H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 45ff.

10 The idea of a form of universality that requires a complex labour of translation can be found in Judith Butler, 'Universality in Culture', in Nussbaum, *Love of Country*.

project relations of sympathy beyond in-groups.[11] As already noted, the preconditions of the ethical encounter described above include certain emotional and expressive capacities which revolve around mutually intelligible concerns about the vulnerabilities of the body. Some such reference to inherent capacities which can bind strangers together has a distinguished presence in the history of Western moral and political thought. It is evident in Aristotle's claim that 'there is . . . a general idea of just and unjust in accordance with nature, as all in a manner divine, even if there are neither communications nor agreement between them'.[12] The capacity for feeling pity for others, he argued, stems from the agent's fears for his or her personal well-being, a position which was defended by Adam Smith with the correct proviso that the root of the capacity to sympathise with others is, at one and the same time, often the reason for decisions to place the satisfaction of one's relatively minor interests before the welfare of others.[13]

Aristotle's observations about certain intuitive understandings about justice that can bind persons who have neither communicated with each other nor entered into a previous pact, resonate with the claims made earlier about the most elementary forms of human solidarity. The emphasis here is on how the vulnerabilities of the person and the emotions such as sympathy which can be woven around them – sensitivities which have existed to some degree in all ways of life – create the possibility of 'embodied cosmopolitanism', that is the potentiality for extending rights of moral consideration to all other human beings, and indeed to all creatures that are sentient.[14] The emphasis is on the *potentialities* which arise from corporeality or embodiment since, of course, rather more than recognition of this biological legacy must be in place to convert mere possibilities into binding social practices.

We shall come back to the question of the factors which can intercede between certain basic universal experiences and the structure of moral codes, but some prior remarks about empathy and sympathy may be useful to capture the essential point. As Smith emphasised, certain empathetic dispositions which are based on anxieties about one's own welfare do not guarantee the development of sympathy for others.[15] Empathy can make it easier for the torturer to estimate the victim's likely breaking-point, and it may lead to the voyeuristic enjoyment of media spectacles of distant suffering. Sympathy, which all societies must endeavour to inculcate in their members to some degree, has almost always been largely confined to members of the same 'survival group'.[16] Almost all social moralities have revolved around insider–outsider distinctions that devalued the suffering of distant strangers and even attached positive value to it. In such conditions, help for 'distant strangers' has not

---

[11] For Occidental rationalism and societal rationalisation, see Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalisation of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

[12] Aristotle, *The 'Art' of Rhetoric* (London: William Heinemann, 1959), Book 1.13.

[13] Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), p. 9.

[14] See my 'Distant Suffering and Cosmopolitan Obligations', *International Politics*, 44:1 (2007), pp. 19–36.

[15] Adam Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, pp. 136–7 maintains that a person may be unable to sleep at night knowing that his or her small finger will be removed the following day, but the same person will sleep peacefully even though s/he knows that countless distant strangers face the most awful calamities – presuming, Smith added, that the person 'never sees them'. For further reflections on these matters, see my *Distant Suffering*.

[16] Or sympathy has been confined to some members of the survival group where forms of stigmatisation blocked its universal expression within the same society.

been 'automatic'. Aristotle observed that a person is more likely to pity another when the victim 'does not deserve it', when the 'evil' involved is of the kind that might afflict oneself or a friend and, crucially, when it 'seems near'.[17] As noted earlier, Smith made a similar point about the unequal moral significance of proximate and distant suffering. Such realities complicate but they do not undermine the claim that certain potentialities for supporting embodied cosmopolitanism have existed in all societies, and may have been realised from time to time, albeit fleetingly and exceptionally, in the relations between very different social groups. The interesting question for a sociology of morals is what has determined whether or not these potentialities have been realised, and what has decided how far cosmopolitan sympathies have influenced international relations.

Solidarity and suffering

Largely neglected sociological questions are raised by these observations about the sources and channels of human sympathy, questions which are directly linked with puzzles about the processes affecting 'the expansion and contraction of the boundaries of community', levels of 'emotional identification' between different societies and the 'scope of moral concern' in international states-systems. These matters have special significance for a mode of sociological investigation which is infused with the normative purposes associated with the Frankfurt School. In particular, they suggest new directions for a critical sociology of world politics with an emancipatory intent. To explain this point more fully, it is necessary to consider how notions of sympathy and compassion have been central to forms of ethical reasoning that challenge Kantian understandings of the relationship between reason and morality of the kind that inform Habermas's conception of critical social theory. It is especially important to consider the rather different approach to ethical reasoning which was advanced by early Frankfurt School reflections on suffering and solidarity; and it is also essential to show how these themes provide a new agenda for critical international theory, one that regards the prevalent attitudes to harm, suffering and vulnerability, and the dominant dispositions to cruelty and compassion, in different international states-systems as the principal object of sociological inquiry.

The starting point for this stage in the discussion is that the capacity to acquire sympathies which can be extended to distant persons is universal; this potentiality to extend 'the scope of moral concern' can be regarded as a 'species-power' which is immanent in most if not all social systems. A link can be forged between this contention and the philosophical claim that sympathy belongs among the more 'primitive' moral emotions, a proposition that does not regard sympathy as a natural endowment or as a biological trait but which contends that it is irreducible to more fundamental ethical dispositions. In deliberations of this kind, attention frequently turns to Wittgenstein's remarks on an 'attitude to a soul' which stressed forms of human recognition which have to be instilled in the course of early, routine socialisation processes before more complex ethical dispositions and relationships

---

[17] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book II. Section 8. and Aristotle, *Poetics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), Sections 7.2 and 7.4.

can develop.[18] Primitiveness in this context refers to the first stages in human moral development in which children are taught that other persons are independent centres of feeling and experience who can be made to suffer and be harmed in other ways by their actions.[19] Inculcating this awareness of sentience and recognition of the causal and possibly harmful effects of actions on other sentient creatures is essential to develop respect for the principles of moral responsibility which are intrinsic to every social group. The capacities for empathising with others, and for developing the separate but related moral ability to sympathise with suffering others, are the foundations on which all moral codes rest.

Schopenhauer, whose influence on Horkheimer will be considered later, placed these attitudes towards the soul at the heart of his ethical system, as is evident from an intriguing passage in his writings which reflects on the report of a mother who murdered one child by pouring boiling oil down its throat, and another by burying it alive. In the course of analysing the reasons for regarding such behaviour as despicable, he maintained that feelings of revulsion are not a response to the mother's failure to be deterred by the thought of divine sanctions, or to the astonishing disregard for the categorical imperative, but to the fundamental cruelty of the deed and the complete absence of compassion. The steeper the gradient between self and other, Schopenhauer added, the more reprehensible such acts are generally regarded.[20] His reflections on such matters did not consider how the 'gradient between self and other' has changed over history or varies in relations between members of the same society as a result of the dominant forms of inclusion and exclusion.[21] Clearly, there are sharp differences in the level of emotional identification between persons, and in the gradient between self and other, in the same society and indeed in the whole history of human societies. Notwithstanding these realities, his emphasis on the ethical significance of revulsion towards certain acts of cruelty, and on the lack of compassion, drew attention to dimensions of the moral code and related emotions which are almost certainly present in all functioning social systems.

Schopenhauer was a forceful critic of what has been regarded as Kant's excessive rationalism which denied that ethical principles can be grounded in the moral emotions. Philosophical inquiries into the relationship between ethics and the emotions are not the subject of this article although it is useful to pause to recall Kant's advice that moral agents should not strive to avoid sites of evident suffering. Direct encounters with suffering were vital, Kant argued, if agents were to develop moral sensibilities and inclinations which would lead them to do what reason required but might not always accomplish on its own.[22] The core issue here is the

---

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), Part II, Section 4. See also the discussion in Gaita, *Common Humanity*, pp. 259ff.

[19] Paul L. Harris, *Children and Emotion: The Development of Psychological Understanding* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), and Craig Taylor, *Sympathy: A Philosophical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

[20] Arthur Schopenhauer, *On The Basis of Morality* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1995), p. 169 and pp. 204–5.

[21] These were crucial themes in the writings of Norbert Elias. For a summary of their significance for International Relations, see my 'Norbert Elias, the ''Civilizing Process'' and International Relations', *International Politics*, 41 (2004), pp. 3–35.

[22] Kant denied that an ethic could be grounded in the emotions, and indeed he expressed a preference for 'cold-blooded goodness' over the 'warmth of affection' precisely because the former was 'more reliable'. See Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 222. Justin Oakley, *Morality and the Emotions* (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 109ff, stresses that recent Kantians have been less

nature of ethical motivation. As various analyses of moral codes and the emotional life have revealed, compliance with social norms depends crucially on how far key principles are embodied in the emotional lives of moral agents and have the force of 'second nature'. None of these accounts denies the importance of the fear of external sanctions for agent conformity with moral codes. What all highlight in addition is the role of psychological factors such as experienced or anticipatory shame or guilt, and feelings of indignation, shock, disgust and so forth, in creating harmony between agents' engrained dispositions and the 'external' demands of moral systems. The gap between agent and structure is bridged (but not always successfully) to the extent that ethical responses are embodied and almost instinctive – that is, to the extent that the configuration of emotions and constitution of impulses make agent compliance with social principles virtually automatic.[23]

Mainstream and critical investigations of world politics are largely guilty of neglecting the psychological and emotional dimensions of social conduct and moral interaction.[24] These elements of human behaviour were central preoccupations of Freudian-influenced Frankfurt School theory, and they were also critical to how analysts such as Erich Fromm (an associate of the Frankfurt School of Psychoanalysis which existed alongside the Institute of Social Research) envisaged combining psychological and materialist approaches to the study of society and history (see below, p. 147).[25] For the purpose of stressing how far Frankfurt School critical theory – and related perspectives in the interwar period – moved the psychological and emotional features of human existence to the forefront of sociological analysis, it is important to recall Schopenhauer's distinctive influence on Horkheimer's reflections on solidarity and suffering, and also the place of the idea of 'injurability' in Adorno's ethical reflections on how modern societies should choose between forms of life. All of these preoccupations, it should be added, preserved core elements in Marx's critique of Hegelian idealism, and most obviously his claim that social investigation should start with concrete human beings or embodied selves which are required to satisfy basic biological needs which remind them of their origins in, and continuing membership of, the natural world. These emphases in Frankfurt School theory are central for the purposes of this article not only because they anticipated the recent sociological interest in the body,[26] but also because they foreshadowed parallel efforts to make vulnerability and frailty central to the defence of human rights.[27]

---

cautious about emotions such as compassion because of their importance for developing a sense of 'connectedness' with other persons. Not that this theme was wholly alien to Kant, as we have seen. Exposure to the poor, the sick and imprisoned could produce 'the pain of compassion', an impulse which had been created by Nature 'for effecting what the representation of duty might not accomplish by itself' (quoted in Cunningham, *Heart of What Matters*, p. 77 and p. 213).

23 See Jack Barbalet, 'Introduction: Why Emotions are Crucial' in Jack Barbalet (ed.), *Emotions and Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). Interesting issues are raised here about how the emotions mark the point where the 'cultural' and the 'somatic' intersect. See Rom Harre and W. Gerrod Parrott, (eds.), *The Emotions: Social, Cultural and Biological Dimensions* (London: Sage, 1996), Introduction.

24 Neta Crawford, 'The Passions of World Politics: Propositions on Emotions and Emotional Relationships', *International Security*, 24 (2001), pp. 116–56.

25 Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (Oxford: Polity, 1993), p. 54.

26 Embodiment was central to Elias's analysis of the civilising process which was first set out in the 1930s. Its significance for the Frankfurt School and for the critical sociology of world politics is considered on pp. 147ff.

27 Bryan S. Turner, 'Outline of a Theory of Human Rights', *Sociology*, 27 (1993), pp 489–512.

First generation Frankfurt School theorists anticipated this last theme by insisting that the critical study of society has a responsibility 'to lend a voice to suffering' (this being a 'condition of all truth') and to 'abolish existing misery'.[28] In a parallel with Weil's thesis, Horkheimer argued that 'human solidarity' is best grounded in the 'shared experience of suffering and creaturely finitude'. Schopenhauer's worldly moral theory was a major influence on his attempt to unite 'materialism and morality'.[29] Similar commitments are evident in Horkheimer's claim that the foundation of 'correct solidarity' lies in the fact that human beings are 'finite beings whose community consists of fear of death and suffering' and who can sympathise with each others' 'struggle to improve and lengthen the life of all'.[30] Adorno's contention that the Holocaust demanded the ethical affirmation of the rights of the 'injurable animal' to receive protection and support defended broadly similar themes.[31] A 'new categorical imperative' was required in his view to ensure that the brutalities of the extermination camps did not occur again.[32] The new imperative would focus on absolute prohibitions rather than on the quest to realise some conception of the good life. Human beings, Adorno argued, 'may not know' what counts as the 'absolute good', but they have reached some shared understandings about 'inhuman' behaviour and about conceptions of the 'bad life' which should be resisted and opposed.[33]

[28] See respectively Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 17–18, and Max Horkheimer, 'Materialism and Morality', in Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 32.

[29] See Seyla Benhabib et al. (eds.), *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 5, and Stephen. E. Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 332–5 on the importance of such themes in Frankfurt School theory more generally.

[30] Horkheimer, quoted in Peter M. Stirk, *Max Horkheimer: A New Interpretation* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 178. Vulnerability did not merely underpin solidarity with 'the community of men lost in the universe' – see Max Horkheimer, 'Schopenhauer Today' in Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Seabury 1974), p. 75. Schopenhauer's defence of a post-anthropocentric ethic was reflected in Horkheimer's additional claim that the idea of vulnerability should underpin compassion for all sentient creatures and 'solidarity with life in general' (Horkheimer, *Materialism*, p. 36; see also Schopenhauer, *Basis of Morality*, pp. 175ff). For broadly similar views, see Adorno, *Problems*, p. 145 on the insights that can be learnt from Schopenhauer's 'crankiness'.

[31] The expression is used by J. M. Bernstein in 'After Auschwitz: Trauma and the Grammar of Ethics', in Robert Fine and Charles Turner (eds.), *Social Theory after the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 122.

[32] See J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 8.

[33] Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 167ff. Whether Adorno overwrote this ethical argument is a question that goes beyond this discussion. Suffice it to add that his comments about an ethic which starts with the conditions of frailty and vulnerability find sympathy in many different areas of philosophical analysis. For comments on parallel themes in recent moral and political theory, see my 'The Harm Principle and Global Ethics', *Global Society*, 20 (2006), pp. 329–43. The rejection of what Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 165–6 calls the practice of placing 'the principle of injury' at the centre of social life can be traced back to the European Enlightenment. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) situates this within the broad cultural shift which supported 'the affirmation of ordinary life' and the parallel rejection of sacred suffering. Horkheimer's later reflections on theology and suffering (see Jurgen Habermas, 'Reflections on the Development of Horkheimer's Work', in Benhabib, *On Max Horkheimer*, ch. 3) invite the comment that several major faith traditions have regarded the capacity for suffering, and the potential for sympathy with the distressed, as the most natural point of solidarity between strangers. See John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Such themes have not been at the forefront of attempts to construct a critical theory of international politics – at least, they have not been central to Habermasian-inspired developments. They have been more central to approaches which draw on Honneth's analysis of the 'struggle for recognition' which preserves certain early Frankfurt School preoccupations by stressing the part that 'moral injury' plays in generating social conflicts, whether by inflicting physical pain or injury, humiliating or demeaning others through 'the withdrawal or refusal of recognition' or by denying others a fair share of social resources.[34] The Habermasian discourse theory of morality has not ignored these themes entirely, but it cannot be said to have stressed them to anything like the same extent.[35]

The next two sections will comment on the Habermasian project of reconstructing historical materialism (and on its possible further reconstruction) but it is useful to pre-empt what is at stake in the discussion by recalling Habermas's specific claim about the cosmopolitan possibilities which were inherent in the first 'speech act' – in the first instances of communicative action which explored the prospects for reaching a shared understanding. The intriguing contention was that the very first speech act contained the promise of the moral and political unity of humankind – alternatively, that the presuppositions of everyday speech, wherever language has been used, have raised the possibility of a worldwide communication community in which all persons enjoy an equal right to advance claims about any decisions that may affect them and possess the same entitlement to influence deliberative outcomes. Collective learning processes over many centuries have brought these possibilities to light, and they have made them central to the advanced, 'post-conventional' moral codes and the associated democratic principles of legitimacy which must be included among the achievements of Occidental rationalism. But since these ethical and possibilities were immanent in the structure of communicative action in all previous phases of history, they were available at least in principle to every form of life.

Many critics have argued that the Habermasian approach to critical social theory rests on an 'excessive rationalism' and a 'limited conception of communication'.[36] Reflecting this concern, one might ask if Weil's claims about the most elementary forms of human solidarity do not suggest a rival conception of the cosmopolitan possibilities which have been immanent in all ways of life. The central issue is whether the very first humanitarian response to the pleas of an 'outsider' did not already contain a vision of universal ethical responsibilities which many ethical codes have developed further, most significantly in the claim that all members of the human race should enjoy the same rights of respect and protection irrespective of citizenship, nationality, race, gender and so forth. The question then is whether the first displays of sympathy for the stranger did not already embody the immanent possibility of

---

34 See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) and Jurgen Hacke, 'The Frankfurt School and International Relations: On the Centrality of Recognition', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 181–94. See also Axel Honneth, 'Mutual Recognition as a Key for a Universal Ethics', at: ⟨www.unesco.or.kr/kor/science_s/project/universal_ethics/asianvalues/honneth.htm⟩.

35 With respect to exploitation, Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 164, distinguishes between 'bodily harm (hunger, exhaustion, illness), personal injury (degradation, servitude, fear), and finally spiritual desperation (loneliness, emptiness) – to which in turn there correspond various hopes – for well-being and security, freedom and dignity, happiness and fulfillment'.

36 Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (London: MIT Press, 1995), p. 9 and p. 183.

global relations of solidarity formed for the purpose of alleviating or ending unnecessary suffering.

It is not possible to do more than pose these questions here; clearly, further reflections are needed to develop and assess this conjecture and to ascertain whether the 'linguistic turn' in critical social theory failed to capitalise on early Frankfurt School reflections on suffering and solidarity for both normative and sociological purposes. Questions about the normative content of critical theory must be set aside because the priority is to extend the conception of a sociological project which has been outlined elsewhere, a project with the purpose of investigating how far the potentialities for global solidarity which can be derived from basic human concerns about vulnerability and injurability have been realised in different states-systems.[37] It is essential to consider Habermas's notion of the reconstruction of historical materialism, and his associated reflections on learning processes in the ethical sphere, before discussing how stronger links between International Relations and historical sociology might be developed.

Collective learning processes and social evolution

It is widely known that Habermas rejected the historical materialist claim that the labour process explains the evolution of humanity along with its exhausted conviction that the resolution of the main capitalist contradictions requires the transition to universal socialism. The reconstruction of historical materialism elevated the domain of communicative action to a position of equality with the labour-process; neither should be privileged, it was argued, in any account of the reproduction of any society or in the broader analysis of the evolution of humanity. An additional contention was that societies have undergone learning processes in the communicative realm which have been as important for the history of the species as the forms of social learning which had given rise to the unrivalled mastery of natural forces.

Habermas has claimed that the rise of reflective, universalistic ethical perspectives is one of the great accomplishments of Occidental rationalism and one of the most significant steps in the development of the species.[38] Collective learning processes replaced mythical narratives with 'rationalized world views' which valued 'argumentative foundations' and which broke through morally parochial ways of life.[39] Abstract ethical systems involved the 'decentration' of world-views, that is the movement from egotistical moral systems to commitments to the Kantian ideal of thinking from the standpoint of all others. They have been an essential part of long-term learning processes which have enabled the species to realise that consensual efforts to decide universalisable ethical principles represent its best hope of freeing global social and political relations from domination and force.[40]

The claim that there are 'homologies' between ego-formation in modern societies and the evolution of humanity as a whole which inform this account of social

---

[37] See my 'The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Implications for the Sociology of States-Systems', *International Affairs*, 78 (2002), pp. 319–38 and Linklater, *Norbert Elias*.

[38] Habermas, *Communication*, ch. 4.

[39] Ibid., p. 105.

[40] Ibid., chs. 3–4.

evolution preserves the early Frankfurt School's specific interest in psychological and psychoanalytical processes.[41] However, the focus on homologies contains few references to the role of collective and individual emotions in social systems – specifically in uniting 'agents' and 'structures' in the manner described earlier.[42] Generally lacking is any recognition of the significance of emotional responses to vulnerability, pain and suffering in understanding long-term patterns of change.[43] The relative silence about these matters underpins the criticism that Habermas's linguistic turn involves the 'decorporealization of Critical Theory'.[44] Honneth has advanced a similar claim by arguing that Habermas's approach 'is directed exclusively to an analysis of rules . . . so that the bodily and physical dimension of social action no longer comes into view. As a result, the human body, whose historical fate both Adorno and Foucault had drawn into the center of the investigation . . . loses all value within a critical social theory.'[45]

The lack of interest in corporeality may reflect the influence of Kant's ethical rationalism with its renowned distrust of the instinctual or impulsive.[46] Habermas is explicit that the human compulsion to satisfy the needs which form an important part of its biological legacy has no logical consequences for ethical reasoning; moreover, he insists that any leap from empirical observations about aversions to pain and injury to specific normative claims about how human beings should organise social and political life commits a 'naturalistic fallacy'.[47] No such problems arise, it is argued, for modes of ethical analysis which begin with the nature of communicative action rather than with the vulnerabilities of the body.[48]

There may be a link between Habermas's essentially Kantian ethical position and the neglect of the body and the emotions in his more sociological writings on

---

[41] See the discussion of psychoanalytical theory in Habermas, *Knowledge*, chs. 10–12 and the references to 'cognitive developmental psychology' in Habermas, *Communication*, p. 100; see also ch. 2 entitled 'Moral Development and Ego Identity'.

[42] Some critics regard this oversight as a weakness in Habermas's position, but not one that his approach is incapable of correcting. See Nick Crossley, 'Emotion and Communicative Action: Habermas, Linguistic Philosophy and Existentialism', in Gillian Bendelow and Simon. J. Williams (eds.), *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[43] Habermas, *Communication*, ch. 3. See also the references to the significance of 'affective expressions' in the evolutionary movement from primates to hominids on p. 134, and the more central concern with the development of 'structures of thought' which is expressed on p. 149.

[44] Joel Whitebook, 'Fantasy and Critique: Some Thoughts on Freud and the Frankfurt School', in David. M. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 300.

[45] Axel Honneth, *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (London: MIT Press, 1991), p. 281. What has been lost, it might be argued, is the 'underground history' which concerns the body and 'the fate of the human instincts and passions which are displaced and distorted by civilization': see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso 1972), p. 231.

[46] Contrasts can be drawn between broadly Kantian moral perspectives which privileged reason over the emotions and various conceptions of a sentimental ethic that support the emancipation of positive moral emotions.

[47] See, for example, the following claim in Habermas, *Communication*, p. 176: 'In living, the organisms themselves make an evaluation to the effect that self-maintenance is preferable to the destruction of the system, reproduction of life to death, health to the risks of sickness'. But from the 'descriptive statement that living systems prefer certain states to others' nothing follows ethically from the standpoint of observers.

[48] See the following claim in Habermas, *Communication*, p. 177): 'For a living being that maintains itself in the structures of ordinary language communication, the validity basis of speech has the binding force of universal and unavoidable – in this sense transcendental – presuppositions. The *theoretician* does not have the same possibility of choice in relation to the validity claims immanent in speech as he does in relation to the basic biological value of health' (italics in original).

long-term patterns of change in the modern West.[49] Not that Habermas has been entirely deaf to the influence of emotional or instinctual drives since he has argued for including in 'the natural basis of history, the heritage of natural history . . . consisting in an impulse potential that is both libidinal and aggressive', although he adds that emotional impulses are never encountered without the mediating effect of language and culture. There is explicit recognition here that an inquiry into moral learning which considers 'structures of thought' would be deficient if it neglected the natural 'heritage'. Nevertheless, his writings have not explained how a sociology of collective learning processes should proceed in the light of the fact that natural history 'determines the initial conditions of the reproduction of the human species'.[50]

Towards a sociology of global morals

In a lecture at the launch of the Institute of Psychoanalysis on 16 February 1929, Erich Fromm is reported to have stated that 'the most important psychological and sociological questions' of the era should endeavour to explain the 'connections' between 'the social development of humanity, particularly its economic and techno-logical development, and the development of its mental faculty, particularly the ego-organisation of the human being'.[51] Fromm argued for a materialist approach to 'psychological categories' which recognised that every society 'has not only its own economic and political but also its specific libidinous structure'.[52] Five years later, Horkheimer stressed the importance of integrating psychological approaches into the materialist interpretation of history.[53] Commenting on the Frankfurt School in the 1940s, Wiggershaus maintains that Horkheimer and Adorno seem to have leaned towards a form of 'biological materialism' in the belief that 'there was a utopian potential in instinctual structures'.[54] Reflecting similar themes, Marcuse later dis-tinguished between 'basic repression' and the 'surplus repression' of the instincts which modern civilisation requires. The transition to socialism, he added, would involve not only the reconfiguration of the relations of production but also fundamental changes in the constitution of the human psyche which would include 'a different sensitivity' involving 'different gestures' and 'impulses' and 'an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality (and) ugliness'.[55] A striking feature of those comments is their commitment to a critical approach to society which analyses the interplay between material structures or forces and the organisation of the libidinal and emotional dimensions of individual and collective selves.

Frankfurt School theorists have not been the sole advocates of the need for 'historical psychology'. By the late 1930s, the aspiration to develop more sophisti-cated understandings of the connections between the material dimensions of any society and the dominant personality types had already been promoted by Elias's

---

[49] Jurgen Habermas, 'History and Evolution', *Telos*, 39 (1979), pp. 5–44.
[50] See Habermas, *Knowledge*, pp. 256 and 285.
[51] Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, p. 55.
[52] See Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, p. 55, and Erich Fromm, 'Politics and Psychoanalysis', in S. E. Bronner and D. M. Kellner (eds.), *Critical Theory and Society* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 216.
[53] Thomas A. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (London: MIT Press, 1981), p. 193.
[54] Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, p. 271.
[55] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), pp. 29–30.

analysis of the 'sociogenetic' and 'psychogenetic' elements of the European 'civilizing process' which gathered pace in the 1500s. Elias's legacy in the shape of figurational sociology, as well as Annales histories and the more recent subfield of emotionology all have particular importance for the mode of sociological investigation of international politics to which we now turn in conclusion.[56] At the heart of this approach is the suggestion that the most basic forms of solidarity between strangers are grounded in the shared sense of vulnerability to mental and physical suffering and in the related capacity to enlarge the scope of ethical concern to include the members of all other social groups. The main sociological question is how far commitments to embodied cosmopolitanism, which have been possible in all forms of life, emerged from under the shadows of pernicious systems of exclusion to influence the historical development of relations between societies. It is how far these ethical orientations have been central to collective learning processes in different societies of states; it is how far a world-historical approach to the human species, one that focuses on how social groups spread to all parts of the world and became more closely interconnected over thousands of years, can profit from analysing the development of moral capacities including the potentiality for the development of cosmopolitan forms of solidarity and sympathy.[57] In this perspective, international societies are the key level of analysis because they have been the main steering mechanisms which independent communities have devised for organising increasing levels of global interconnectedness. As organisers of humanity, they have been the vehicles through which certain universal ethical potentialities could be released and embedded in collective efforts to ensure that the relations between social groups do not cause unnecessary suffering to peoples everywhere.

It has been suggested that Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm and others developed a conception of the critical theory of society which aimed to understand the connections between social-structural forces and psychological dynamics, and it has been maintained that Elias's figurational sociology is the main realisation of that aspiration. It is fitting that this article should end with some brief comments on the significance of Eliasian sociology for Frankfurt School critical theory, beginning with the fact that Elias was a member of the Department of Sociology in Frankfurt in the early 1930s, in the period when Horkheimer, Adorno and Fromm were engaged in developing a critical approach to society which incorporated Freudian insights into sociological analysis. Elias was not a member of the Frankfurt School, nor did he subscribe to partisan social inquiry, although his contention that the ultimate purpose of Sociology is to enable human beings to exercise control over uncontrolled social processes, including the complex forms of interdependence which now exist globally, might be said to share the humanist objectives of the Frankfurt School.[58] It

---

[56] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). See also the writings of Lucien Febvre collected in Peter Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History from the Writing of Lucien Febvre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 24, and Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotion Standards', *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), pp. 813–36. See Linklater, *Elias* for a list of key works in figurational sociology which are also relevant to the argument of this article.

[57] For an overview of the relevant literature, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

[58] Elias moved to Frankfurt University when Karl Mannheim was appointed to the Chair of Sociology in 1929. For further details, see Artur Bogner, 'Elias and the Frankfurt School', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (1987), pp. 249–85, and Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*. See also Chris Rojek, 'An

is especially important to stress the affinities between Elias's analysis of the modern West and the sociological directions which members of the Institute of Psychoanalysis and the Institute of Social Research started to explore in the late 1920s and early 1930s (and to lament the continuing fracturing of that discourse into separate branches of Sociology which was initially caused by the rise of Fascism).[59] A sociology of states-systems which draws on Elias's analysis of changing emotional responses to public and private acts of violence and cruelty in Western Europe over five centuries, and on his related examination of how the scope of emotional identification widened in the era in question, at least between members of the same bounded communities, can reinvigorate Frankfurt School social inquiry and develop the account of collective learning processes which was at the core of Habermas's account of social evolution. That sociological project must also address Elias's question of whether unprecedented global interconnectedness might yet extend the scope of emotional identification at the level of humanity and increase the sense of moral responsibility for the imperilled in other societies.[60] Finally, it must embrace his question, which was central to the more overtly normative project of Frankfurt School theory, of whether humanity can organise its social and political affairs with the minimum of force, domination and humiliation during its remaining time on earth.

Conclusion

Many thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Weil, Horkheimer and Adorno have placed solidarity with the suffering at the centre of their conceptions of ethical life. Their approach has the merit of highlighting moral sentiments which have been essential for the reproduction of all forms of life, and which may have had some salience in relations with other groups in very different historical eras. The most accessible forms of cosmopolitanism draw on universal capacities for sympathising with the suffering, but how far embodied cosmopolitanism has shaped different states-systems, and has an unusual influence in the modern world, are matters for a sociological project which can usefully combine Frankfurt School theory with Elias's analysis of civilising processes. Investigating these questions is critical to understanding how the human race may yet come to organise its political affairs so that all individuals and communities are released from constraints which are not absolutely necessary for the reproduction of society, which are grounded in gross asymmetries of power, in the

Anatomy of the Leicester School of Sociology: An Interview with Eric Dunning', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 4 (2004), pp. 337–59.

[59] It is idle to speculate – but irresistible nonetheless – about how critical social theory might have developed if Adorno's discussions with Elias had continued beyond the 1930s so that Horkheimer and Adorno's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* had engaged directly with *The Civilising Process* (the former was first published in 1944, the latter in 1939). It is equally tempting to speculate about how an explicit engagement with Frankfurt School critical theory might have shaped Elias's own project and the fate of European Sociology more generally.

[60] See Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Stephen Mennell, 'The Formation of We-Images: A Process Theory', in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and Abram De Swaan, 'Widening Circles of Identification: Emotional Concerns in Sociogenetic Perspective', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 12 (1995), pp. 25–39.

dominion of sectional interests, in disrespect for other persons or groups, and in forms of fear, distrust and insecurity that are intrinsic to intractable social conflicts. The purpose of a global sociology of morals with an emancipatory intent is to understand how human beings might yet learn to live together without such crippling infestations and afflictions.