

# Social Atomism and its Problems—Metaphysical and Political

Graham Priest

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Departments of Philosophy, the CUNY Graduate Center, the University of Melbourne, and the Ruhr University of Bochum

## Abstract

Social atomism is a view that informs much contemporary social thinking. Drawing on arguments from Marxism and Buddhism, I will argue that it is false, and explore the consequences of this for a number of issues, notably those related to the ideology of capitalism.

## 1 Introduction

Our concern in what follows will be social atomism. This is a view about the nature of people and the societies in which they live. It is a view that informs much contemporary social and economic thinking.

The view is, however, false, as pointed out by philosophical traditions as different as those of Marxism and Buddhism. In the first half of the essay, I will explain why. In the second part, we will look at some of the political implications of this, particularly concerning the ideology of capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is a written-up version of a lectures on the same topic given at the Universities of Western Connecticut, Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and Dundee (Scots Philosophical Association), in 2022. Many thanks to the audiences on those occasions for their helpful thoughts and comment.

## 2 Metaphysical Considerations

### 2.1 Social Atomism

For a start, what is social atomism? To get some understanding of this, compare it with physical atomism (of the 19th-Century kind). Reality is composed of physical atoms. These exist and have a nature (are what they are) independently of each other. In virtue of that nature they come together and combine with other atoms to form complex structures which function in a certain way.

Social atomism is an analogous view concerning people and the societies which they constitute. Each person is an entity which exists and has a nature independently of others. Specifically, they have desires and self-interests, completely independent of those of others. In a “state of nature”, they pursue these interests, which leads to conflict with others. They therefore come together to form a complex structure, a society, which functions in a certain way. Specifically, they agree to abide by a set of rules, and to have them enforced if necessary. Some of these may be against an individual’s proper interests; but, overall, people benefit from the security of the rules. People are still free to pursue their interests, even when they conflict with those of others, provided only that they abide by the rules ensuring that the conflict does not “get out of hand”. In other words, people enter into a society to look after self-interest and only self-interest.

This is social contract theory. It arises in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. Thus, we find the basic idea explained by Diderot (1713–1784) in his *Encyclopédie* as follows:<sup>2</sup>

The citizens have rights, rights that are sacred for the very body of society: the citizens exist independently of society; they form its necessary elements; and they only enter it in order to put themselves, with their rights, under the protection of those laws to which they sacrifice their liberty.

Social contract theory is to be found in Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke, in which form it is found embedded in the US Constitution.<sup>3</sup> For the most

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<sup>2</sup>Marglin (2008), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., *Preamble*: We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our

part, those who espoused social contract theory did not regard the “state of nature” as an historical reality. It was simply a conceptual framework aimed at justifying a certain set of social relations. Moreover, it is no coincidence that social contract theory arose in Europe just when capitalism was hitting its strides. For it was exactly capitalist social relations that it legitimated.

But the social contract is not just a myth; it is a fairly tale. The metaphysical account of what it is to be a person, and the social relations in which they are embedded, is incoherent. Sayers puts the matter as follows:<sup>4</sup>

We are inherently and essentially social beings. We develop our natures... only by participating in society... Sociality is inscribed in our very biology.

And as Marx put it in *Grundrisse*:<sup>5</sup>

The human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politicon* not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society... is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other.

## 2.2 Marx

Let us consider matters further with the help of Marx. He notes that, like all other species, the human species has a certain nature (*Gattungswesen*). For sure, this is partly biological, but it is also social. Being a person requires being a member of a society (in the general sense, namely, of a group of people who interact and cooperate with each other). It takes at least two to procreate, and some kind of social structure is necessary for the rearing of a child. No person can survive in their early years without carers. Adults engage in economic relations connected with the production of the necessities of life.

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Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. *XIV Amendment*: ... No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

<sup>4</sup>Sayers (1998), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Nicolaus (1993), p. 84.

And for good reason: an adult who is not embedded in a bunch of people is very vulnerable (to the elements, to times when sustenance production goes wrong, to other people, and so on), and is unlikely to last for long. For good measure, we might add that it is not just the basic elements of human life that require a society. No one can enjoy the pleasures of the sport of Cricket or the game of Go unless there are people to teach them, practice with, etc; no one can enjoy the arts unless there are people to create and perform them, and so on. Both work and leisure, therefore, are essentially social activities. It is impossible for people to flourish if they are deprived of their social connections: remember that solitary confinement is used as a form of punishment.

Marx notes the social nature of people clearly:<sup>6</sup>

Exchange, both of human activity within production itself and also of human products with each other, is equivalent to species-activity and species enjoyment whose real, conscious, and true being is social activity and social enjoyment. Since human nature is the true communal nature of man, men create and produce their communal nature by their natural activities; they produce their social being which is no abstract, universal power over against the struggle of individuals, but the nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own enjoyment, his own wealth.

Or more tersely, as the sixth of his *Theses on Feuerbach* says:<sup>7</sup>

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.

And in *Grundrisse*, we have:<sup>8</sup>

Society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of the interrelations, the interrelations within which these individuals stand. As if someone were to say: Seen from the perspective of society, there are no slaves and no citizens: both are human beings. Rather, they are that outside society. To be a slave, to be a citizen are social characteristics, relations between human beings...

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<sup>6</sup>See McLellan (2000), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup>McLellan (2000), p. 172.

<sup>8</sup>Nicolaus (1973), p. 265.

People are what they are, then, in virtue of, and only in virtue of, the social relations in which they are embedded. It makes no sense to think of them and their interests outwith that. Society is not a configuration formed to enforce pre-existing interests, but a pre-existing matrix, which forms such interests and provides for the needs of its members.

## 2.3 Buddhism

An even more general picture of the same kind arises in Buddhist philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

There is a standard view in Buddhism called *pratīyasamutpāda*—dependent origination, interdependence. Everything physical or mental is located in a network of causes and effects. According to this, every state of affairs, be it physical or mental, is brought about by an array of causes which work together to produce it; and every state of affairs has, in conjunction with others, an array of effects. Perhaps this is not something that most people would find surprising. However, we rarely think through how profound this causal network is.

Thus, to take one small example. Suppose that I go and have a coffee in a local coffee shop in Manhattan. The coffee was grown on a bush in a country far away. The energy to grow the bush came, ultimately, from the sun. The water needed came from rainfall and local streams. The berries were picked by local labour. The coffee was transported by ships belonging to yet another country, most of whose sailors being from a third country. The ship's engines are powered by coal mined and sold in yet a fourth country. The coffee was bought by distributors in New York, roasted, and distributed to the chain of shops they run, subject to a whole bunch of laws passed by both Federal and State legislators. The coffee is sold to me by those who work there, most of whom do this as a part-time job, as they study or pursue a professional career. My purchase helps to keep them employed, so to achieve their goals. Often I have a friendly chat with them. This (I hope!) helps to put them in a good mood, and so to enjoy the day. They will then be friendly to other customers, which helps to put them in a good mood; and so on.

Or another example. I published a book, *Capitalism—its Nature and its Replacement*.<sup>10</sup> I decided to write it because I find the socio-economic

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<sup>9</sup>For further discussion of the material in this subsection, see Garfield (2015), chs. 2, 3.

<sup>10</sup>Priest (2022). This contains a much fuller discussion of all the matters covered in this essay.

world in which we live a very sorry place. I learned about this by my own experience, but also by reading books and newspapers, written by others, and listening to international broadcasters, such as the BBC. When it was finished, I sent it to publishers, some of whom were in other countries, and they consulted referees from all over the world. The book went into print on paper made from trees produced by our natural environment. But most people (now) will probably read it on line. To do this, they depend on networked computers developed by generations of computer scientists, and satellites circling the Earth developed, again, by generations of engineers. All of this, of course, uses energy, which heats the earth, and so changes its ecosystem. The book will be read by some people (I hope!), and they will either disagree with it or agree with it. If they disagree with it, they may think me some sort of misguided ideologue; if they agree with it then, maybe, it will change some of the things they think and do. This will have an effect on those with whom they come in contact. And so on.

These are the barest details of some of the chains of cause and effect of those two events. Once one starts to think about the matter, the causal connections ramify indefinitely. And so it is for all other events. Yet, one hardly ever thinks about these things. When one does so, it becomes clear that we are deeply entangled with the natural world, our social environment, and people all over the world. The world is a causally highly complex place, and we are deeply interdependent beings.

The most profound significance of *pratīyasamutpāda* was brought out by Madhyamaka, one of the two Indian schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

What something is depends on other things. For example its parts: something could not be a goldfish if it had the parts of a car. Or people's conceptions: something could not be money if people did not believe that it could be exchanged for other things. The Madhyamaka philosophers pointed out that the nature of something depends, moreover, on the causal network in which it is located.

What makes something a rice plant? The fact that it grows out of a grain of rice, delivers further rice grains, etc. If it grew out of an onion, and delivered, not grains of rice, but goldfish, it would not be a rice plant. The processes of cause and effect involved here are constitutive. Similarly, what makes something water? This is the kind of thing which puts out fires, quenches thirst, and so on. If something were the kind of thing that burns, and poisons people who drink it, it would not be water. Again, the causal processes in play here are important. One might suggest that it is not these

phenomenological properties that make something water, but the chemical constitution of the stuff,  $H_2O$ . But this is to say that to be water is to be composed of molecules with two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. This is itself a matter of causal interactions.

Exactly the same kind of considerations apply to persons. They are what they are, at least in part, because of the fact that they breathe air, not water, that their parts interact in appropriate ways, that they were produced by a genetic code of a certain kind. These causal processes determine what it is to be human.

What we see, then, is that objects in general, and people in particular, have the identity they do because they are located in a web of relations, particularly causal relations. Traditional Buddhists did not pay much attention to social role-relations, such as being a policeman, university lecturer, mother, politician; but they are an essential part of the picture too. One can be these things only if one is involved in the appropriate social casual chains.

## 2.4 Putting these Together

Let us now put these two parts of the picture together. Social atomism tells us that we are creatures which have natures, moral rights, and interests, etc., independently of those of other people. Marxist philosophy, as we saw, rejects this as a piece of social ontology. In the *Holy Family*, Marx himself says, somewhat sarcastically:<sup>11</sup>

Speaking exactly and in the prosaic sense, the members of civil society are not atoms... The egoistic individual in civil society may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself to the size of an atom, i.e. to an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless absolutely full, blessed being. Unblessed sensuous reality does not bother about his imagination; each of his senses compels him to believe in the existence of the world and the individuals outside him and even his profane stomach reminds him every day that the world outside him is not empty, but is what really fills. Every activity and property of his being, every one of his vital urges becomes a need, a necessity, which his self-seeking transforms into seeking for other things and human beings outside him...

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<sup>11</sup>McLellan (2000), pp. 126-3.

Buddhism says little, as such, about the social interconnectedness of people. However, what it does do is locate social interconnectedness in the much bigger picture of quite general interconnectedness: that delivered by the notion of *pratīyasamutpāda*. Social atomism is, then, based not just on a political sham, but on a metaphysical sham.

## 3 Political Considerations

### 3.1 Capitalism

Let us now turn to the political consequences of the matter. These concern capitalism and its ideology. So let me start by quickly summarising the relevant points about capitalism.

Capitalism is a socio-economic formation in which the means of economic production are controlled—owned or managed—by a small number of people. Let us call them *capitalists*. The means of economic production include land, plant, machinery, information, and so on. The means of production do not produce anything in and of themselves, though: they have to be worked. This is done by the vast majority of people, who depend for their livelihood on being employed by those who own the means of production. Let us call them *workers*. Hence the capitalists need workers and the workers need capitalists. They therefore come together to agree that the workers will work the means of production in return for payment by the capitalist, who is, therefore, in a position to keep the bulk of the wealth produced in the process—that is, to exploit the labour of the workers.

Thus are things produced. The point of the production, at least as far as the capitalist is concerned, is not, however, the well-being of people. The wealth acquired by the capitalist in the process is used simply for the production of more wealth—in other words, capital growth. A part of the mechanism for such growth is competition. Each quantum of capital will try to maximise its production and exchange by competing with other quanta, driving them out of business (or taking them over).

As is not too difficult to see, the social atomist/contract theory is a mirror-image of capitalist production. The capitalists and workers have natures and interests of a certain kind (growth on the part of the capitalist, and acquiring the means to live on the part of the workers). So they agree to abide by certain rules, most notably certain property relations, for their



mutual benefit. Capitalists are free to compete as long as the competition is regulated in a certain way. This is a function of the capitalist state, whose main job is to protect the collective interests of capital—such as certain kinds of property, competition, and growth.

According to the *Bible*, God created man in his own image (*Genesis* 1: 27). Or as Feuerbach inverted the thought, man created God in his own image.<sup>12</sup> One may think of social atomism/contract as a view of society created by capitalism in its own image. Unsurprisingly, then, the metaphysical picture can be—and often is—used to legitimise capitalist socio-economic relations—that is, to have them considered reasonable and acceptable.<sup>13</sup> Capitalist relations and the capitalist state are just special cases of human relations and the state, as given by social atomism and the social contract. And these are acceptable, since they are just the way that society works. Moreover, one would therefore fail if one tried to make them otherwise. So, it would be unreasonable to try.

But human relations and society are not as thus described. So the theory plays an ideological role in capitalism—ideology, as I use the term here, being a view that is false, but covers over the truth.

Let us look at some aspects of this falsification.

## 3.2 Free Agreement

Just as the social contract is an agreement freely entered into by people in their own interests, so, it is said, owners of the means of production and the people required to work them come together as owners of capitals, and make voluntary agreements about how these are to be used. In particular, the agent of a quantity of capital confronts people who have none of it, save their ability to work—their labour power, in Marx' terms. The two then freely agree to exchange labour power (on the part of the worker) for money (on the part of capital). Since this a free exchange, it is perfectly just.

However, this free exchange and its supposed justice is an illusion. As Marx cuttingly puts it:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>See Gooch (2016), §4.

<sup>13</sup>Legitimation: the act or result of making something legitimate, i.e., considered reasonable and acceptable. *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/legitimation>.

<sup>14</sup>Fowkes (1976), p. 415.

The contract by which he [GP: the wage labourer] sold his labour power to the capitalist proved in black and white, so to speak, that he was free to dispose of himself. But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he was no “free agent”, that the period of time for which he is free to sell his labour power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it.

The capitalist does not have to employ the worker. They can employ someone else—perhaps from the global South. Or they can—indeed will—move their capital elsewhere if it can make a greater profit. The worker has no choice. They must sell their labour or become destitute. True, they may sell it to the “highest bidder”, but sell it they must. This is no more a free exchange than giving away your wallet at gun-point.

In reply to this, one often hears it said that there is nothing unjust about the situation since the capitalist has earned their wealth through their own efforts, and so may dispose of it as they wish. Generally speaking, they have not. Their wealth comes from an accident of birth: the time, place, and family into which they were born. Those who own great wealth have usually inherited a large amount of it. True, they may have used it to make more, but this is standardly done by investing the money, the returns of which clearly depend on the labour of others. In other words, the money is not obtained by the person’s “own efforts”.

There is a particularly American version of this bit of ideology: *anyone* can make it if they work hard enough. Corollary: those who do not make it are lazy. This is completely false. Those who come from poorer sections of society have the odds stacked against them from the start—in terms of education, resources, opportunities. And the single mother who holds down two jobs to bring up a couple of kids in a poor neighborhood of New York or London works much harder than a broker who plays the stock market. Moreover, *anyone can make it* does not imply *everyone can make it*, any more than the fact that anyone who plays a fair game can win it implies that everyone who plays the game can win it. It is conceptually impossible for everyone to get rich by exploiting the labour of everybody else.

And in any case, the paper wealth that a person starts with is only a minute fragment of the capital they mobilise. Whoever they are, they freely use amassed social capital, in the form of previous technological developments, social infrastructure, education and research, none of which has been earned by their own efforts.

Stiglitz, an erstwhile Chief Economist of the World Bank, sums matters up as follows:<sup>15</sup>

A simple thought experiment should induce a note of humility: What would I have achieved if I had been born to parents in a remote village of Papua New Guinea or in the Congo? Every American business benefits from the rule of law, the infrastructure, and the technology that has been created over centuries. Steve Jobs could not have created the iPhone if there had not been the multitude of inventions that went into it, much of it based on publicly funded research over the preceding half century.

Indeed, it needs to be remembered that much of the social capital of the global North is the result of violence, robbery, and exploitation of people in the countries of the global South.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.3 Competition

Next, social atomism says that people are naturally self-interested, and act in that interest, competing with others in those interests. The social contract preserves the right to pursue those, subject only to certain social/legal rules preventing such competition getting “out of hand”.

Capitalism, as we noted, involves competition, and part of the ideology of capitalism is to the effect that competition is natural. Cooperation has to be enforced. Now, notwithstanding the fact that conflicts in human relations do occur naturally, in a certain sense, cooperation occurs naturally. People do not cooperate because of laws. Laws can be functional only *because* people cooperate. The commonplace nature of cooperation in nature and society is well documented by Kropotkin in his 1914 book *Mutual Aid*.<sup>17</sup>

However, the valorisation of competition delivers a very general strategy for setting worker against worker, in a policy of divide-and-conquer. It can therefore be used to undermine solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Quite generally, top-down power

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<sup>15</sup>Stiglitz (2019), p. 139.

<sup>16</sup>See, e.g., McKelvey (2018), ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Bookchin (2008).

<sup>18</sup>Thus, for example, as Leech (2012), p. 118, notes, workers in wealthy capitalist nations often side with capital against immigrant labour to defend what they think to be their own interests.

structures of the kind that capitalism delivers are wont to destroy communal solidarity and collegiality, since these provide a source of resistance to such power, as is documented by Rucker in his monumental *Nationalism and Culture*.<sup>19</sup>

Further, as the Harvard economist Marglin argues, contemporary economics—the handmaiden of capitalist ideology—itself destroys communal structure and solidarity:<sup>20</sup>

In arguing for the market, economics legitimizes the destruction of community and thus helps to construct a world in which community struggles to survive...

Indeed, we may have good reason to dismantle the engine of growth—not because growth is a threat to our relationship with nature, but because it is a threat to our relationships with one another.

By promoting market relationships, economics undermines reciprocity, altruism, and mutual obligation, and therewith the necessity of community. The very foundations of economics, by justifying the expansion of markets, lead inexorably to the weakening of community.

### 3.4 Capitalist Economics

Which brings us to economics itself. Just as, in social atomism, everyone is held to benefit from the order imposed by the social contract, so, in a free-market capitalist system everyone benefits—so it is claimed. However, it's pretty obvious that cooperation often achieves much better results than competition. A football team that plays as a team will achieve much better results than one in which each player is simply trying to show how good they are. People working together can produce better results than people working in isolation.

The *locus classicus* for the benefit of “invisible hand of the market” is a much quoted passage from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*:<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Rucker (1998).

<sup>20</sup>Marglin (2008), pp. 4, 27. The way that contemporary economic theory fallaciously promotes a pernicious individualism is explained in detail in ch. 4.

<sup>21</sup>Cannan (1937), p. 423.

As every individual ... endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value, every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it.

Now, as often as this claim is heard, it is well known to be false, as is recognised by at least some economists. Here, for example, is Stiglitz again:<sup>22</sup>

The idea that markets are a powerful way of organizing production of goods and services has been deeply influential. It has provided the intellectual underpinnings of capitalism. But two centuries of research have now brought us to a better understanding of why Adam Smith's invisible hand can't be seen: because it isn't there.

Smith's claim is refuted by some simple examples from game-theory (of which, living in the 18th Century, he had no knowledge). These show that if two or more people act in such a way as to each promote their own interests, the result can be sub-optimal for both.

One kind of example which demonstrates this is usually called the *Prisoners' Dilemma*, since it may be illustrated by the following sort of example.<sup>23</sup> Archie and Bettie have committed a crime, and been arrested on suspicion.

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<sup>22</sup>Stiglitz (2019), p. 76.

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., Osborne (2009), ch. 2.

The magistrate, Maggie, needs a confession. Maggie puts the two in separate cells (so that they cannot communicate) and tells them each the following. If neither of you confesses, you will both get 1 year. If both of you confess, you will both get 5 years. *But...* if one of you confesses (and turns state-evidence) and the other does not, the one who confesses will get off (0 years) and the other will get 10 years. The information may be displayed as follows:

		Archie	
		<i>Confess</i>	<i>Don't</i>
Bettie	<i>Confess</i>	5	10
	<i>Don't</i>	0	1
		10	1

Maggie then leaves the two to ruminate. Archie reflects as follows. Bettie will either confess or she won't. Suppose she confesses. I'm better off if I confess (5 years) than if I don't (10 years). Suppose she doesn't. Again, I'm better off if I confess (0 years) than if I don't (1 year). So in either case, I'm better off confessing. Bettie reasons in exactly the same way. So both confess. By acting in terms of self-interest, then, each of the pair gets 5 years. This is sub-optimal, since they could have got away with 1 year each.<sup>24</sup>

Note, also, that what Smith actually says is that if every person works so as to promote their own interest, the result is the promotion of the public interest. What exactly, he means by 'public interest' is not explained; but I presume that he means that the *total* social wealth is increased. Even if this claim were true, it hardly implies that *most* people benefit from this, however, as Smith himself later points out concerning the division of labour enforced by a free market. In a much less noted passage from *Wealth of Nations* he says:<sup>25</sup>

[t]he man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exercise his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the

<sup>24</sup>When the phenomenon appears in a social context, it is often known as the *tragedy of the commons*—a term made popular by Hardin (1968).

<sup>25</sup>Cannan (1937), p. 734 f.

habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part of rational conversations, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.

It is those who are most adept at exploiting their fellow human beings that benefit from unbridled competition. The fact that a capitalist free market system, to the extent that there is one,<sup>26</sup> results in the concentration of wealth in a few hands means that those who have poor levels of sanitation, education, health care, do *not* benefit from it, as they could if wealth were used more equitably, in a humane and compassionate way.

### 3.5 Selfishness

Capital acts in its own self-interest, a right preserved in the “social contract”. In the process, of course, others may be damaged. But social atomism says that the point of entering into the social contract is to look after one’s own interests. One bears no responsibility for others. In other words, it legitimates selfishness. Indeed, the “rational man” of capitalist economics is a person who maximizes their own goods, never mind the needs of others.

Those influenced by the ideology (most of us) take the point: it’s fine to be selfish, and so we act in this way. As Marglin puts it:<sup>27</sup>

[The capitalist market is a system that] not only regulates itself, but regulates [us] ourselves, a process that shapes and forms people whose relationships with one another are circumscribed and reduced by the market.

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<sup>26</sup>In fact, we have never really seen a free market, since markets in “liberal democracies” are always gerrymandered by governments and by capital manipulation itself. As Stiglitz (2019), p. 47, writes: ‘Standard economics textbooks—and much political rhetoric—focus on the importance of competition. Over the past four decades, economic theory and evidence have laid waste to the claims that most markets are by and large competitive and the belief that some variant of the “competitive model” provides a good, or even adequate, description of our economy.

<sup>27</sup>Marglin (2008), p. 2.

It is no surprise that the effect of this is particularly strong on those who operate the capitalist economic system. So, Stiglitz says:<sup>28</sup>

It is not an accident that bankers exhibit the extent of moral turpitude that they do. It has been shown by experiments how bankers—especially when they are reminded that they are bankers—act in a more dishonest and selfish way. They are shaped by their profession.<sup>29</sup> So too for economists; while those who choose to study economics may be more selfish than others, the longer they study economics, the more selfish they become.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, looking at the world through the capitalist lens—and that means through the lens of social atomism—legitimises the disregard of the well-being of others. In the same way, a certain take on the Theory of Evolution, namely, that provided by Social Darwinism, legitimised imperialism.<sup>31</sup>

After four years of the first (and, I most certainly hope, only) Trump presidency in the US, I think it unnecessary to belabour the social corrosiveness of selfishness.

### 3.6 Unchangeability

Finally, there is the claim that capitalism cannot be changed. It is just the way that society works. In particular, any attempts to radically change it will cause a dysfunctional chaos. Now, it is true that, from inside a system, it is hard to see how things could be otherwise. Notwithstanding, the claim is, again, just false.

One does not need a deep knowledge of the history of the human race to know that, over its history, forms of socio-economic production have changed radically. They will change again. The claim that the political economy of 3,000 will be the same as that of 2,000—assuming, that is, that the human race manages to be around for another 1,000 years, which is anything but a good bet at the moment—is literally incredible. It is like someone saying in the year 1,000 that society and economics will be the same in 2,000 as it is in 1,000. Indeed, the contemporary claim is even more incredible since

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<sup>28</sup>Stiglitz (2019), p. 30. Footnotes his. One might recall here, the point about Right Livelihood in the Eightfold Noble Path.

<sup>29</sup>See Cohn, Fehr, and Maréchal (2014).

<sup>30</sup>See Bauman and Rose (2011).

<sup>31</sup>See, e.g., Williams (2000).



we now know a lot more about history and the changes this brings than did a Medieval European at the end of the first millennium CE. Indeed, even a thinker as economically orthodox as J. S. Mill argued (in 1848) that capitalism would become obsolete:<sup>32</sup>

The form of association... which, if mankind continues to improve, must be expected to predominate is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and work-people without a voice in management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves.

Of course capitalism will not last forever. The questions are only ‘how will things be different’, and ‘how can we change them for the better’? I suppose that it might be said that there is no better system. Such a claim would beggar belief. The system we now have has been delivered to us by an uncoordinated series of historical events. And such evolution—biological or economic—rarely finds optimal solutions; its results are usually a kludge. (Think of the results of biological evolution.) Of course we can do better.

## 4 Conclusion

What we have seen is that social atomism and social contract theory paint a false picture of the nature of people and their society. People are essentially social beings, as Marx was clear. Moreover, as Buddhist metaphysics underlines, social atomism is, quite generally, metaphysically incoherent.

Despite this, as a key element of capitalist ideology, it is used to justify capitalism: a system predicated upon a denial of social interconnection, as a way for some people to exploit others in their own interests.

The picture is morally corrosive. Since people are essentially social, the well-being of each person can be assured only if the well-being of the members of the community in which they find themselves is also assured—all of them, since they all contribute to the general weal. What Buddhist metaphysics adds to this picture, with its understanding of the breadth and depths of *pratīyasamutpāda* is that we need to bear in mind the well-being of *all* the

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<sup>32</sup>Mill (1920), ch. 7, sec 6, p. 773.

people and other things on which we interdepend. And this will be, as near as makes no difference, all people, present and future (as well as other creatures that can suffer).<sup>33</sup> The Buddhist word for this attitude is *care*.<sup>34</sup>

Garfield puts the matter as follows:<sup>35</sup>

To cultivate care in this sense is to recognize both the omnipresence of suffering and our interconnectedness through the web of dependent origination: it is to recognize that one cannot solve even the problem of one's own suffering without caring for that of others as well, given our essentially social nature and the claims that nature ensures we make upon one another.

Flourishing is a collective process. Standard moral theories often depict morality as a zero-sum game. My rights are your duties, and vice versa. This is already to model morality on capitalism, where, if the buyer makes a profit, the seller makes a loss, and vice versa. For one who takes our social interconnectedness to heart, morality is quite the opposite. Moral action is a win/win situation.

Of course, that raises the question of what a socio-economic system based on a more adequate understanding of people, society, and the relationship between them would be like. This is a much tougher question, and one for another occasion.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>One of the people who has most stressed this aspect of interdependence is Thich Nhat Hanh. Indeed, the Buddhist order he founded is called the *Order of Interbeing*. See, e.g., Hahn (1987), esp. ch. 6.

<sup>34</sup>The Sanskrit is *karuṇā*, standardly translated as *compassion*; but *care* is more accurate.

<sup>35</sup>Garfield (2015), p. 289.

<sup>36</sup>But see Priest (2022).

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