

Chapter 6

Interest, Disinterestedness, and Pragmatic Interestedness: Jewish Contributions to the Search for a Moral Economic Vision



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6.1 Introduction: The Dialectics of Pragmatic Interestedness and Disinterestedness

This chapter suggests the idea of pragmatic interestedness (henceforth: PI) as means for thinking on what may constitute conscious forms of capitalism as viable moral options, while shedding some light on why PI is often marginalized. This paper, however, does not presume to provide a new theory of capitalism,¹ or a new perspective on Jewish approaches to economic policy. The human virtue of PI can be described as non-egoistic (but not self-sacrificial) inclination toward the promotion of personal and social flourishing. PI is often out of sight, since as Moses Pava (2009: 86–87) observes, pragmatism as general concept is frequently but misguidedly identified with sheer opportunism. For religious pragmatists (or

¹I use here the terms “conscious capitalism” and “humane capitalism” interchangeably. On pragmatism and business ethics see the work of Sandra Rosenthal and Rogene Buchholz (2000), and the recent article by Matej Drašček et al. (2021).

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pragmatist religionists), however, pragmatism is instructive for engaging holistically with complex problems. In the economic context, PI is a major (if implicit) theme of the capitalist economic ethos, most famously in Adam Smith's philosophy. Smith opened his 1759 book *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the following observation:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it.²

Human beings, from such (proto-)pragmatist perspective, are rational and emotional creatures endowed with the capacity to care, and with interests that are not necessarily egoistic. PI means that having interests is basic to human nature, that interestedness is not necessarily negative interestedness, and that interests are viewed as potentially positive, productive, and ultimately inescapable to human life. PI is in this regard akin to the basic intuitions of moral particularism. In the economic context, PI underlies the very idea of consent, and of consented transaction. Approving or disapproving a deal, a contract, or even the participation in religious covenants as such, are predicated on human volition.³ The philosophical anthropology which underlies PI views positively the openness to fellow human beings and to society at large, as well as the care for nature and animals.

6.1.1 *Pragmatic Interestedness (PI) Versus Disinterestedness (DI)*

Pragmatic interestedness, which is proximal to the idea of meliorism in classical American pragmatism (hereafter: CAP),⁴ is non-trivial. Adam Smith (2002, 315) had typified three basic approaches to ethics: (i) governing human virtues and vices with propriety; (ii) pursuit of private interests with prudence; and (iii) praising disinterested benevolence. To Smith's mind, "The great division of our affections is into the selfish and the benevolent" (ibid). Common to all these approaches is a contrast between the interests of the individual and of others. Western thinkers often assume a polarity of egoism and altruism as the default paradigm of human nature, and PI is thus frequently marginalized. Disinterestedness (DI) approaches commonly perceive the human creature as merely egoistic, whose initial interests do not accord morality in any substantive manner. This view typically dichotomizes

²Smith 2002: 11. For an assessment of his moral economy, see the discussion by Samuel Fleischacker (2004, chapters 3–5).

³PI is also the basis of the idea of *resentment*: once a person's expectation or interest fails, it makes sense to be disappointed.

⁴On pragmatic meliorism see James 1974: 179–186.

between the individual (thus perceived as an egoistic ‘self’) and between her fellow humans, society, and nature, which are accordingly conceived as depriving the interests of the individual. Based on this dichotomy, a benevolent or pro-social action requires self-elimination or -sacrifice, or minimally self-indifference.

As we often see in modern philosophy in thinkers such as Descartes and Pascal, the status of the individual is perceived as shaky and even worthless.⁵ As such, every profit or gain that individuals make is inevitably conceived as a exploitation: a worthless creature does not merit any reward.⁶ Based on that, moral disinterestedness is often taken in modernity as the ethical default (see Gaston 2005). The moral logic of DI is noble, and in modernity had its famous expression in Immanuel Kant.⁷ People often praise principled disinterested acts, yet from a consequentialist moral perspective this intentionality warrants nothing. Furthermore, as Moshe Halbertal claims, many horrific deeds of victimizing other persons, were conducted due to a principled *disinterestedness*.⁸ DI, as Adam Smith observed, is often not neutral as it presumes to be: “The great mob of mankind are [...] most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness.” (Smith 2002: 72). Based on pessimism concerning human nature, DI often assumes that there is no possibility for an ethic of the greater good and an intersection of moral worldly interests. DI thus mandates that the interests of the individual vis-a-vis fellow humans should be suspended, while the interests of fellow humans should be prioritized.

Whereas DI is predicated on a static and relatively gloomy conception of the human, PI appreciates the dynamic path. These rival approaches – PI and DI – have far reaching consequences for thinking about ethics and about ethical economy. Clearly, the idea of disinterestedness is found, to some degree, in every culture and tradition (including Jewish tradition, within which we shall consider PI below), but it seems that the appearance of DI in some intellectual schools is more profound.

The remainder of the chapter will comprise of three sections. Section 6.2 will lay the axiological background and clarify why religious traditions at all matter for contemporary secularized societal discourses, and to business ethics in particular. It will do so by presenting the concept of *agape* and two of its influential modern

⁵Consequently, as Erich Fromm had argued in his *Escape from Freedom*, many moderns tend to give up their individuality and surrender to the rule of the collective or to a self-deifying dictator. See Fromm 1941: 24–102.

⁶On the political theological sources of the idea of merit, in the context of John Rawls’s theory vis-à-vis its Pelagian influences, see in Eric Nelson’s work (2019). Contra Augustine’s doctrine of the Original Sin, Pelagius contended that human beings do have substantial merit. Nelson proposes that Pelagianism inspired Rawls’s commitment to liberal egalitarianism.

⁷Kant’s notion of aesthetic DI also characterized his ethical theory. The Kantian DI was rather extremized within twentieth century trajectories, such as the notion of absurdity in twentieth century Existentialism. Consider for instance Albert Camus’s books *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. On Camus’s absurdity as prescriptive rather than descriptive, see the discussion by Avi Sagi (2002, 43–46).

⁸In Halbertal’s words: “misguided self-transcendence is morally more problematic and lethal than a disproportionate attachment to self-interest” (Halbertal 2015: 78).

secularizations in Karl Marx and Peter Singer. The third section will demonstrate the role of pragmatic interestedness as it is found in early Jewish thought. The concluding section (Sect. 6.4) will reflect on how can the idea of PI contribute to the conception of conscious or humane capitalism.

6.2 Modern Secularizations of *Agape* and the Marginalization of Pragmatic Interestedness

If conscious capitalism is predicated on these and other forms of pragmatic interestedness, then understanding how PI is marginalized by DI is significant. In this section we thus present the Christian concept of *Agape* or universal love, which emphasizes DI, and remark on two influential secularizations of *agape*.

6.2.1 *Politics of Love and Its Discontents: “The Modern World Is Full of the Old Christian Virtues Gone Mad”*

Can human societies avoid interested-based (including economic) relations entirely, and predicate themselves solely on disinterested love? This, I believe, is a key question when coming to think about why markets and economic relations and transactions are so often condemned (on this hostility, see Mackey and Sisodia 2013). One can hardly understand the sources of the objections to financial interactions – not only to Capitalism – without considering the long religious career of disinterestedness and of the hate of money making. These objections were fueled in the modern era by the “spirit of suspicion” (see Ricoeur 1970), which suspects motivations altogether.

The prototypical alternative that DI sets in opposition to the imperfect reality of human interests (and to the legal attempt to handle them) is *love*. The quest for establishing a “politics of love” by eliminating instrumental social relations is longstanding. As David Nirenberg aptly observes, “Many who invoke love are optimistic about its powers”, but “If today love can seem as liberation from possession and exchange, it is because its ancient incest has been repressed” (Nirenberg 2008: 491, 492). Absent of a sustainable equilibrium between love, interests, and law, or between the abstract yearning for justice and between considering the concrete constraints and demands of human life and kinship, disinterested love threatens to foster injustice.

This problem becomes more stressing as contemporary societies often ignore, as Nirenberg points out, their historical and traditional sources (from a pragmatist perspective, it should be noted, these sources do not dogmatically bind anyone to believe or do x, y, or z). Ignoring the complexity and richness of past religious

traditions makes the discussions about them less informed, and at times distorted.⁹ But the presumed remoteness of ideas does not prevent their actual impact. As Gilbert Keith Chesterton strikingly observed:

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was shattered at the Reformation), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and [inflict their] damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. (Chesterton 1908: 38–39)

The modern project is full of good intentions, but it often ignores the ideational force of traditional virtues and vices as well as their fragile holistic textures. Paradoxically, as Chesterton observes, those are not necessarily the *vices* whose wandering in the modern atmosphere is most hazardous, but the virtues. When they wander unrestricted in the modern world, most people are not aware – as Catholic Christianity often was¹⁰ – that these virtues have a history, that they have a religious context, and that they might be abused. And the more powerful an idea is, the more important it is to mediate it and to expose it to public reasoning.

6.2.2 *Political Theology and Modern Secularizations of Agape*

Agape has, I believe, a tremendous relevance for the modern discourse of economy. Not recognizing the ongoing significance of *agape* in the present makes it harder to deliberate the role of PI. Let us define *agape* briefly.

For Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, *philia* denotes true love, which transcends *eros* or erotic love (Nussbaum 1986). The frequent translation of the Septuagint to the word love (A.H.Bh) in the Hebrew Bible, however, is *agape*. Parallel to the downgrading of legality in early Christianity, *agape* as love was transformed, and St. John’s conception is foundational: “The person who does not love (*agapōn*) does not know God, because God is love (*agape* [ἀγάπη])” (1 John 4:8).¹¹ *Agape* is comprised of three principles: (i) God *is* love; (ii) true love does not discriminate; and accordingly, (iii) love is the principal religious virtue for humans to practice (see Nygren 1953, esp. 147). *Agape* was expressed implicitly in modernity in John Lennon’s famous 1967 song, performed by the Beatles: “All you need is love”. *Agape* is both theological and ethical concept. In simple words, *agape*

⁹Recall, e.g., Richard Rorty’s notion of religion as a “conversation stopper” (Rorty 1994).

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, for instance, contended that self-love is vital for nourishing the love and care for others (Thomas Aquinas 2016: 92–94). On the Thomistic synergy between individual and society see Wohlman 2005, esp. 47–48.

¹¹*Agape* is clearly associated in Christianity with Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

strictly opposes any parochialism or privilege, and commands a total devotion to humanity as a whole, without any particular preference.

Many traditional Christian authors, such as Origen of Alexandria, strive to mediate *agape* and *eros*, with the demands of maintaining societal interactions, sexual reproduction, and individual corporeal existence (Nygren 1953: 464–475). Modern scholars such as Martin C. D’Arcy, Paul Tillich, Gene Outka, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Timothy P. Jackson have recognized the powerfulness and even explosiveness of *agape*, which mandates strict egalitarian regard, toward friends and foes alike, and at the same time challenges the notions of retribution and reciprocity (see Berman [forthcoming-a]). Those are precisely Christian scholars, then, who insist that *agape* should be moderated, especially when normative claims are at stake. Similarly to the dialectics in Judaism between mercy (*hesed*)¹² and justice (*din*), *agape* must be balanced with normative and legal considerations.¹³

What happens when modernism rebels Christianity (think of Marx and Nietzsche) and gives rise to a disenchanted world? As Chesterton speculated, and contrastingly to the modernist eulogies of religions, traditional virtues and vices did not simply disappear, but remain intact. So, where did *agape* go in the secularized world? In today’s intellectual sphere, a productive way to think about such questions is through the discipline of political theology. This discipline is well recognized as vital for addressing questions of economic morality (see, e.g., the works of Max Weber [1950] and Adam Kotsko [2018]). It is widely acknowledged in political theology, following Carl Schmitt (see 2005: 36), that modern political concepts are secularized theological ones. In recent decades, various scholars discuss moral virtues, such as love and hope, against their religious backgrounds. Simon May, for instance, contends that the modern obsession with disinterested love has its origin in the Christian *Agape* (May 2019: 11–31). This virtue will be explored here, vis-a-vis the phenomenon of PI and economic transactions.

The basic challenge is that *agape*, when taken or comprehended in an isolated or exclusivist manner, does not leave a clear space or legitimacy for privileging anyone, including one’s spouse, family, children, friends, and community. In fact, *agape* challenges and even denounces the very category of privilege and merit. From a plain anthropological and normative perspective, however, the demand for absolute impartiality seems problematic. At the same time, it is challenging to be critical toward the role of *agape* in the contemporary (so-called) “post-Christian” world, due to the very dialectics of secularization.

It is, however, possible to address this complexity through the prism of post-secular theories (i.e., that of scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Eliezer Schweid, José Casanova, and Philip Gorski). Post-secularism theories (see e.g. Casanova 1994), which overlap the discipline of Political Theology in many ways, are aware of the presence and potency of religious ideas in the modern world, but remain

¹²*Agape* has a basis in the biblical idea of *hesed*, though it differs in that *agape* entails the active love of enemies. For elaboration see Berman (forthcoming-a). On the complications and genealogy of the term “Judaism” see Boyarin 2018.

¹³On *agape* in the legal context, see Cochran and Calo (2017).

critical about the influence of their secularized forms.¹⁴ In the case of *agape*, the question is what its secularized forms are, and how do they impinge upon the ability to legitimate commercial transactions, humane capitalism, and PI more broadly.

6.2.3 *Communism and Sentientism as Secularizations of Agape*

In this subsection I wish to propose a novel hypothesis, which has a significant relevance for the possibility of PI. I wish to sketch how the influential ideologies of both (i) Karl Marx's Communism and (ii) Peter Singer's 'Sentientism' appear to be – however in different ways – *implicit* secularizations of *agape*. The argument (which I will elaborate elsewhere) is formulated here in an introductory manner.

6.2.3.1 *Communism as a Secularization of Agape*

The idea that Marxism or Communism is a secularization of Christian redemptive schemes is not new, as we learn from Alasdair MacIntyre (1968: 92).¹⁵ However, to my best knowledge, the concept of *agape* was not yet identified as the secularized ideational core of Communism.

Communism originated by Marx as a rebellion against economic injustice, and against the way in which religious otherworldliness maintained the depression of the poor. Marx stressed the value of equal regard to all human beings, regardless of kinship, nationality, or collective affiliation.¹⁶ This type of egalitarianism, it should be stressed, goes several steps beyond the plain notion of equal regard as anti-discrimination. Marxism implies an active *rejection* of one's personal affiliations and belongings to family, congregation, or nation. In this sense, Communism accords with *agape* as equal love (obviously, without the religious metaphysics of *agape*).¹⁷ Interests obviously have a role in the Marxist critique of power

¹⁴This sensitivity is supported by the following observation by Israel J. Yuval (2010: 69): "cultural identities never develop wholly internally, but through a dialogical process in which one culture consciously separates itself from another culture to which it is sufficiently close".

¹⁵MacIntyre claims that both Christianity and Marxism recognize human fallenness but are less successful in paving the road for redemption. However, MacIntyre's analysis of Marx does not with *agape*.

¹⁶For instance: "Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force" (Marx 1977: 171).

¹⁷Strikingly, both (John) Lennon and (Vladimir) Lenin aimed – declaratively, at least – to horizontalize human commitments while erasing any presumed parochialism.

structures, and in this sense overlaps PI.¹⁸ But the strict Marxist universalism and its either-or scheme (victims vs. victimizers) devaluates particular spheres of belonging, and this is where PI is superseded.

The vast scholarly research on Marxism recognizes its indebtedness to St. Paul and to the famous verse in *Galatians* 3:28, which presumes to erase all human differences,¹⁹ but I am not aware of a scholarly connection between Marxism and *agape*. Communism applied the *agape* on the social level, by deconstructing the family unit so to ‘horizontalize’ the entire human society in an egalitarian manner.²⁰ However, as Eugene Kamenka contended, Marx failed to understand that “It is in the pursuit of particular, specific goods, and not in the pursuit of the spurious universality of an ahistorical ‘common good’, that men reveal their ethical qualities and the extent to which knowledge and disinterestedness can shape or permeate their lives”.²¹ Disinterestedness or acting for the sake of another person or some worthy value indeed *has* ethical merit, but it can become meaningful, Kamenka argues, only within a relational framework.²²

The Marxist portrayal of moral duty as inhabited by even, ‘flat’ human molecules appealed to the reductionist modern ear, and affiliates with the mechanistic worldview of the seventeenth century, and with Spinoza’s geometrical pantheism – which remain intellectually influential and attractive. This ‘ontological egalitarianism’ supersedes the medieval hierarchical and animated Aristotelian worldview, which was saturated with taxonomies and desires (including the desire of unanimated objects, such as stones, to return into their ‘natural home’).²³ No simplistic return to Aristotelian science is needed, but an acknowledgement the significance or pragmatist postulates and of social modalities (see correspondingly James 1974, and Walzer 1983; Bell and Pei 2020).

¹⁸ Interestingly, the affiliation with one’s *class* – and more specifically with the working class – is mandated by the Communist credo, despite its universal aim.

¹⁹ See for example Welborn 2017. See also the pioneering analysis by Daniel Boyarin (1994) of the profound complications of Pauline doctrine and its modern repercussions.

²⁰ Jerry Z. Muller remarks that whereas for Marx “intermediate and particular identities block real happiness”, for Hegel family and other particular spheres are central for human flourishing (Muller 2002: 195–196).

²¹ E. Kamenka, “Marxism and Ethics – A Reconsideration”, in Avineri 1977: 119–146, at 134.

²² The great Zionist thinker, Aharon David Gordon (1856–1922) made a similar critique of Tolstoy’s philosophy of love. In this context, Einat Ramon (2007: 72–167) fascinatingly contends that Gordon foreshadowed feminist care ethics.

²³ This worldview was criticized by modern science, though from a scientific perspective viewing the world through a pragmatist ‘as if’ lens seems possible and even indispensable. This pragmatism is akin to the Kantian utilization of postulates, namely that moral deliberation depends on certain metaphysical premises.

6.2.3.2 Sentientism as a Secularization of *Agape*

Peter Singer is one of the most influential ethical philosophers of our time. His approach is utilitarian in method, and his axiology is egalitarian. Singer (2011, 117–118) indeed endorses Marx’s universalism and disinterestedness as means for expanding the moral circle. Singer’s central thesis is that all sentient animals have interests and are equal in their capacity to feel pain, suffering, and joy.²⁴ Preferring one’s own species (namely, humans) is thus parochial and is considered by Singer as ‘Speciesism’,²⁵ which is “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.” (Singer 2009: 35).

The moral alternative to Speciesism and its self-interestedness, according to Singer, is to treat all sentient beings, as equal in worth. Singer’s ‘Sentientism’ or ‘Unitarianism’²⁶ views sentient creatures in an ‘egalitarian’ fashion, thus aiming to distribute human empathy equally upon all living creatures (humans included). Singer’s connection to the *agape*, or his implicit reliance on *agape*, can be compared to Marx: similarly to Communism, Singer aims to avoid any partiality²⁷; differently from Marx, Singer aims to spread human sympathy upon all sentient creatures.²⁸ Interestingly, Singer is aware of the underlying duty to love one’s enemies which is central to *agape* (see his 2011, 40) and he acknowledges that something similar to his ethic exists in the thought of St. Francis of Assisi (Singer 2009: 287), whose universal – and presumably *agapic* – love was de-jure directed toward animal creatures and inanimate entities (such as stones) alike.²⁹ Singer is aware (Singer 2009: 288–289) that this kind of “ecstatic universal love” might harm the moral equilibrium. Yet, he understands that he stretches the boundaries of equal concern far beyond the human. On the one hand, interests lie at the core of Singer’s ethic, yet his equation of the moral worth of all sentient beings makes it hard to

²⁴“The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way. [...] A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer” (Singer 2009: 37).

²⁵Singer (2009: 24) states that “our present attitudes to these beings are based on a long history of prejudice and arbitrary discrimination. I argue that there can be no reason – except the selfish desire to preserve the privileges of the exploiting group – for refusing to extend the basic principle of equality of consideration to members of other species”.

²⁶‘Unitarianism’ is how Shelly Kagan (2019, 2) titles Singer’s approach, as the term “egalitarianism” already labels socialist approaches. Kagan’s alternative ethical approach, “modal personism” (ibid, 137–145, 159–169), recognizes differences and continuities between humans and animals, as well as the existence of liminal cases (such as embryos and vegetative states).

²⁷On whether Singer’s own behavior and normative choices are relevant for thinking about the topic, see Leibowitz 2016.

²⁸Interestingly, both Marx and Singer are of Jewish background, which makes the identification of their indebtedness to *agape* more challenging.

²⁹Charles C. Camosy (2012: 168–169) made an important remark about the proximity of Singer’s ethic to *agape*, though I am not aware of any existing scholarly argument which straightforwardly proposes *agape* as the underlying (however implicit) factor in Singer’s ethic.

account for the peculiarity of human interests and how they are intertwined with human rationality. Despite Sentientism's recognition of interests, it yet seems utterly different from humane PI as defined here.

6.2.4 *Why Both Marx and Singer's Approaches Marginalize Pragmatic Interestedness*

We saw in this section that the PI is deeply challenged by the concept of *agape* in its unmediated and secularized forms. The way Marx and Singer secularize and unleash the *agape* may account for the tremendous public tailwind that Communism and Sentientism enjoy. The 'horizontalization' of moral duty in both Communism and Sentientism seems harmful for PI, which endorses particular forms of kinship and affiliation. It should be noted, however, that the above discussion of Marx and Singer by no means intends to undermine the commitment to social injustice³⁰ or to reduce animal suffering,³¹ but to direct the scholarly attention toward the concept of PI. What, then, is the role of PI in the Jewish economic context? Can it shed any light on the above questions? Addressing this is the task of Sect. 6.3, whereas the ramifications of this excursus for a pragmatist appraisal of economic transactions will be considered in Sect. 6.4.

6.3 Pragmatic Interestedness in Early Jewish Tradition

We shall now demonstrate the role of pragmatic interestedness (or *me'uyanut pragmatit* in Hebrew) as found in the context of the early Jewish thought, with special focus on the economic aspect. By exploring PI, I follow Moses Pava (2009) who emphasizes the role of pragmatism and dialogue in Jewish business ethics. Judaism stands out as a case study for capitalist ethos, for as Werner Sombart argued (2001: 186). For a consideration of Sombart's complex attitude toward Jews and Judaism, (see Muller 2002: 252–257). Jewish civilization seems to have a significant teleological trajectory: "No term is more familiar to the ear of the Jew than *tachlis*, which means purpose, aim, end, or goal". It seems that this pragmatist teleology is akin to PI: an interest is typically an interest in attaining a *certain goal* or purpose. As we learn from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1950), this kind of motivation is not exclusive to Jewish culture.

³⁰The Marxist and later Communist (Russian and other) constellations need not be exclusively equated with the idea of sociality. Consider, for example, what David Graeber (2014: 67–68) had termed as 'baseline communism' which is social in a broad sense.

³¹The philosophical approaches of Hans Jonas and Shelly Kagan, e.g., testify that there could be a commitment to reduce animal suffering, without sacrificing the redundancy of humans. This discussion exceeds the present one.

This section will (Sect. 6.3.1) present the complicated duality of the concept of interest, (Sect. 6.3.2) emphasize the recognition of human needs and interests in Judaism, (Sect. 6.3.3) highlight the Sages' sensitivity to the modalities of human commitment, and (Sect. 6.3.4) comment on the axiological role of market place and economic considerations in Jewish tradition. This section, clearly, is only a bird's eye view. It points out several currents in talmudic Judaism, in order to demonstrate what PI is. It does not provide a historical review of Jews and economic life³² or Jewish approaches to economic questions,³³ and does not engage with modern-day transformations within various sub-groups of world Jewry.³⁴ Clearly, there are many disputes among Jews and talmudic Sages (*HaZaL*)³⁵ on most issues, and economy is no exception. Yet, I try to sketch a preliminary portrayal.

6.3.1 *Interest and Its Discontents*

The starting point for analyzing pragmatic interestedness in the Jewish context is the historical intersection of Jews and interest (see Penslar 2001). As Alan L. Mittleman observes (2008: 131), "Jews, as an economic factor, were given an inordinate share of the blame for the woes of the modern world". True, throughout the Middle Ages many Jews were moneylenders (due to some prohibitions on owning land, and due to Jewish literacy), and were thus accused for charging usury – namely, interest (in Hebrew: *ribbit*).³⁶

The paradoxical consequence of emancipation in modernity was that the Jewish role and contribution in Capitalism increased antisemitism, as Hannah Arendt (1962: 3–88) observed.

The dark shadow of this profession was philosophically influential and had long been associated with the accusation of Jews as interest-motivated (in the bad sense of the term). This shadow has its roots in the Hebrew Bible, which indeed restricts the charge of interest. According to the Mosaic, Written law, Jews are not allowed to charge interest from Jews (Deut 23:20). This could be seen as a double-standard but could nevertheless be perceived as a *higher* standard which is expected from the members of any particular community. As the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks contended, such a modal structure *can* be a part of a global covenant (Sacks 2003: 225–227).

³² See for example the articles included in the volume *Religion and Economy* (Ben-Sasson 1995), and the editorial introduction to this volume by Menahem Ben-Sasson, which concisely maps the territory.

³³ See Levine 2012; Hellinger 2010; Navon 2018.

³⁴ See e.g. Mittleman 2008 on the adaptiveness of Religious Zionism to the socialist ethos of early twentieth century Zionism.

³⁵ *hakhameinu zikhram li-bhrakhah* (in Hebrew: our sages of blessed memory, hereafter: the Sages).

³⁶ For the pre-modern historical picture, see comprehensively in Mell 2017. The ambivalence of the English translation of the Mosaic term *ribbit* – interest and usury – captures the complex ethical connections between interest and finance, and at the same time indicates its potential pitfalls.

The initial challenge is that getting rid of particularity does not necessarily strengthen social solidarity. Therefore, in the biblical ethos the “kinship group should be as large and diverse as possible while still allowing kin group members to feel socially, politically, and existentially connected to one another” as Joshua A. Berman contends (2008, 81–108, at 96). Yet, Jews had problems of observing the biblical usury-prohibition even within the Jewish circle. The interpreters of Jewish law (*halakhah*) thus developed the financial mechanism called *hetter iska* (*hetter* literally means permission; *iska* is literally a deal), which is a permission to charge interest from fellow Jews.³⁷ This became customary in Jewish society, even though its biblical basis is questionable. At the same time, as historian Salo W. Baron contended, “Whatever drawbacks this [communal] system may have had [...] it is apparently true that no Jew seems ever to have died of hunger, while living in a Jewish community” (Baron 1952: 100).³⁸

The portrayal of Jews as narrowly-egoistic is thus inaccurate at best, but was nevertheless widespread in modernism, very much by the influence of Marx, who transformed and hyposthesized the hostility against Jews into a more general contempt against interestedness: “The god of practical need and self-interest is money. Money is the jealous god of Israel before whom no other god may stand” (Marx 2002: 67). As Jerry Muller asserts: “All the negative moral evaluations that traditional Christians and modern post-Christian [...] applied to Jews should in fact [according to Marx] be applied to capitalist society. [...] Marx himself reiterated so many negative characterizations of the Jews and their economic role” (Muller 2002: 187).³⁹ And when social reparative energy is wasted on condemning interestedness (or PI) per-se, rather than searching for ways to amend injustices, the striving toward humanistic cooperation is often neglected. True, there are clearly some important ethical lessons to be learned from the systematic Marxist critique, and a binary discourse of “sons of light” vs “sons of darkness” is not productive.⁴⁰ The question is whether Marxism provides the constructive side of the coin, and not only the analysis of injustice, exploitation and so on.⁴¹

³⁷ See Maimonides’s definition for this financial mechanism, in his *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Agents and Partners” (6:2).

³⁸ This sentence by Baron is cited by Chaim Navon (2018: 120) who stresses (124–126) that the idea of free markets does not mean selfishness, radical individualism (à la Ayn Rand), or greediness.

³⁹ A discussion of the place of Jews and Judaism within modern sociological conceptions (e.g. in the theories of Werner Sombart and Max Weber) is beyond the scope of this chapter. On the German, French, and American schools on Jews and economy, see Goldberg 2017.

⁴⁰ As Yoram Hazony contends, Marxist social critique does have a merit: “By analyzing society in terms of power relations among classes or groups, we can bring to light important political phenomena to which Enlightenment liberal theories – theories that tend to reduce politics to the individual and his or her private liberties – are systematically blind” (Hazony 2020). On binary inclinations see Haidt and Lukianoff 2017: 52–80.

⁴¹ Marx’s hostility toward tradition and metaphysics is contrasted to the pro-metaphysical and pro-traditional approach of Peirce, James, and Dewey. On metaphysical aspects of CAP see Berman (forthcoming-b). Marx’s hostility to religion does not mean that religious ideas were absent in his thought, as I suggest above (Sect. 6.2.3) concerning his secularization of *Agape*.

As we see how Jews become a symbol of interested greed, can the discussion about humane or conscious capitalism yet be enriched by Jewish tradition? The willingness to recognize pragmatic (or Jewish) interestedness as valuable is – as we learn from the case of Marx and Engels – depends largely on the axiology of the beholder, or simply on her interest. Rather than performing an in-depth textual examination of economic institutions in Jewish law (*halakhah*), we shall make a few remarks on the philosophical topography of PI in Jewish tradition.

6.3.2 Moral Values, Human Needs, and Transactions

The most basic feature of PI in Jewish tradition is the initial attention toward human needs or neediness. To be sure, asceticism can be found in Judaism, but following the negative approach of the Hebrew Bible toward celibacy and monasticism,⁴² the main avenues of Jewish tradition identify human needs as something positive that needs to be channeled, satisfied, and/or sublimated, rather than suppressed or straightforwardly combated. A concise definition of the metaphysical role of needs and interests vis-a-vis values was given by Rabbi Prof. Eliezer Berkovits (2004: 87):

All encounters in this world are meetings of needs set in a context of value. The needs have their origin in the essential imperfection of creation; the value, in the act of creation. [...] value without need, giving us perfection, would extinguish both man and his world. Yet [...] need without value would render all endeavor and striving unworthy [...] Only in response to the need that is at the heart of all meanings and value does man fulfil his destiny.

Differently from conceiving ethics as strictly deontological, Berkovits grounds ethics in the realm of human neediness. Such portrayal, which is advocating the heuristic theological value of world-creation, is at the same time a key for appreciating the act of *giving*. This giving is not one-sided but carries the wish for reciprocity.⁴³ The role of give and take was emphasized by David Nirenberg who highlights the linkage in the Hebrew Bible (as well as in its neighboring Near Eastern cultures) and in the etymology of the Hebrew language, between love, giving, and transactions: “the most common word for love and friendship in the Hebrew Bible, *ahabah*, is related to the trilateral root *y-h-b*, associated with gifts and giving.” (Nirenberg 2008: 493).

In this vein, there is in post-biblical Judaism a pragmatic recognition of societal transactions. Financial transactions and the market are important places where such give-and-take happens. Here is another interesting etymological fact: The tannaitic Hebrew⁴⁴ phrase for give-and-take (*masa u-matan*) is translated in the Aramaic

⁴² See Numbers 6:1–21, and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Hilkhot De’ot” 3:1.

⁴³ For a discussion of the talmudic economic ethos as open to the future and as aiming to avoid the eschatological (non-economic) future, as different from the early Christian quest to replace the mundane economy with divine grace, see Brezis 2018: 59–103. As Brezis remarks (82 ff.), however, a worldly inclination is found in Christianity as well.

⁴⁴ Namely, the register of the Hebrew used by the *Tannaim* (plural form of *Tanna*), the early Sages.

language used in the Babylonian Talmud as *shaqla ve-taria*.⁴⁵ This term initially denotes the giving of reasons, and the subsequent receiving of feedback or critique.⁴⁶ Individual needs entail the reaching out to others and engaging in (hopefully) constructive verbal bargaining and discussion. The very term for denoting the talmudic discourse, then, draws on economic metaphor. If PI is vital in Jewish tradition, this etymology is more than a coincidence.

The Talmud (particularly tractate *Bava Metzia*) dedicates many chapters to defining the realms of legitimate or fair transactions. But market-transactions cannot take place absent of acknowledging the role of free individuals who sell and buy in a consented manner.⁴⁷ As Allan L. Mittleman (2008, 133) comments, “Although a concern for the common good and social welfare pervade the texts, Jewish law does acknowledge and protect private property, competition and relatively free markets”. In accordance with Berkovits’s above assertion, the freedom of trade cannot function where might is right, and where individuals fail to appreciate the common good and universal ethical norms. Values such as justice, equity, decency, and compassion are indispensable to how talmudic law views financial transactions of the kind we associate here with PI.

6.3.3 *The Value of Compromise and the Possibility of Substitute Monetary Compensation*

The role of economic interests brings to the front the need to achieve a greater good, and this is often dependent upon the willingness of humans to compromise. In this regard, partiality is a virtue rather than a vice, because with impartial or maximalist conceptions, conciliation often seems out of reach.

In order to reach a compromise, the Sages went as far as uprooting a Mosaic law, as we see in the case of the sabbatical year,⁴⁸ law or *mitzvah*. One of its laws is the debt relief (as mandated by Deut 15:1–3) once in seven years. The Torah, however, understood the mental mechanism of the creditor who figured that the seventh year is approaching, and would refrain from lending to the poor (Deut 15:9).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See for example Babylonian Talmud [hereafter: *BT*], tractate *Bava Metzia* 64a.

⁴⁶ That one ought, and should, expose oneself to the arguments of others is far from trivial. See the critique of Harry Frankfurt by Menachem Fisch and Yitzhak Benbaji (2011).

⁴⁷ In the talmudic period, slavery was a legitimate social institution. Yet the Sages stress the religious value of freedom, which is a condition for a voluntary performance of God’s law. To the Sages, this is why the Bible determines that a slave who wishes to remain enslaved after six years, “his master shall bore his ear through with an awl” (Exodus 21:6): human beings are *God’s* servants, and not *servants of servants* (see *BT*, tractate *Kiddushin* 22b).

⁴⁸ In Hebrew, the word *sheva* means seven. Accordingly, the seventh year (*shemithah*, or the sabbatical year) is called *shevi’it*.

⁴⁹ “Beware lest you harbor the base thought, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching’, so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give [loan] him nothing. He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will incur guilt”.

As legal scholars, the Sages could simply ignore the aforementioned pressing social problem of the sabbatical year, and ‘let the law prevail at all costs’ (*yikov ha-din et ha-har*),⁵⁰ regardless of the consequences; they nevertheless chose to consider them. The *prozbul* enactment, which was legislated by Hillel the elderly and detailed in Mishnah *Shevi’it*,⁵¹ practically annulled the biblical canceling of debts in the sabbatical year, and the corresponding prohibition of charging usury. From a fundamentalist or literalist point of view – be it the legal hermeneutics of ancient Dead Sea Sect, Karaite Judaism, or Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* – the *prozbul* is a hermeneutical bankruptcy. The justification for this innovative legal flexibility, however, lies in a combination of sensitivity for the needy and in *realpolitik*, as Pinhas Shifman, my father-in-law, suggested (Shifman 1991).

The *prozbul* is but one example for how the needs of individuals and society are prudentially prioritized over a particular Mosaic instruction, in a way that maintains the course of ordinary economic life. What is the theological ground of this “legal economism”? What is predicating the Sages’ assumption that the Torah is attentive to social needs? A basic premise of how public affairs are viewed in Jewish law is the notion that “The Torah has mercy on the money [or resources more broadly] of Jews”.⁵² This saying, contra Marx, does not mean a fetishistic capitalism, nor does it exclude the well-being of non-Jews from the moral calculus. It rather acknowledges that life-preserving resources are not fully-separable from the human lives it sustains. For in the talmudic worldview, as Rabbi El’azar claimed, preserving human life depends on acquiring the resources for its sustaining: “If there is no flour [*kemah*], there is no Torah; [and] if there is no Torah, there is not flour” (Mishnah *Avot* 3:17). This is a non-trivial and indeed striking statement, which testifies for the proto-pragmatist vision of the Sages. This PI obviously stands in some contrast with DI as defined above (Sects. 6.1 and 6.2).

The principal value of compromise in Judaism is illuminated by David Brezis’s portrayal of the mythological or typological roots of the pragmatist talmudic character, in the context of Judah son of Jacob. Judah marries Tamar, who is a Canaanite. The Canaanites are described in early Jewish commentaries as merchants, or “*pragmutatim*”,⁵³ and Judah joins this club. Then, facing the horrific incident with Joseph in the pit, Judah is willing to sell (in a mercantile fashion) his brother to the Ishmaelites, in order to save Joseph’s life. Selling one’s brother doesn’t feel very moral, but there is a context here to be considered. Some of Joseph’s brothers wanted to murder him, while Judah’s non-ideal compromise indeed saved his life.

⁵⁰ Literally: ‘pierce the mountain’. The origin of this phrase is *Tosefta* tractate Sanhedrin 1:3 (Tosefta is an early talmudic compilation, which runs parallel to the sequence of the six orders of the *Mishnah*).

⁵¹ Chapter 10:3 of Mishnah *Shevi’it* reads: “[A loan secured by] a *prozbul* is not cancelled. This was one of the things enacted by Hillel the elder”.

⁵² See BT *Rosh HaShanah* 27a; BT *Yoma* 39a, and other instances, and the numerous commentaries on this principle by the medieval sages (*rishonim*) and post-medieval sages (*aḥaronim*).

⁵³ See the rabbinic commentary on Genesis, *Genesis Rabbah* 76:8.

This life-seeking substitute reveals, according to Brezis something profound about the early Jewish or Judaic ethos:

The root B.Z.‘A is used in the Talmud as a term in monetary law, indicating a compromise between the parties. Hence the positive role ascribed to Judah in the selling of Joseph. The quest for compromise⁵⁴ is what gives his [Judah’s] initiative its justification. As an alternative to killing, the selling of Joseph marks a turn from blood [*dam*] to money [*damim*], from jealous maneuver of life-sacrificing to economical move, implying, as with the sacrifice, a turn to the substitute. [...] By that, he [Judah] incorporates a kind of economic-pragmatist logic, as distinguished from Josephian radicalism [...] Judah is identified with a pragmatist attitude that does not clash with the world but rather aims to create an open relationship of co-existence with it. (Brezis 2015: 39–40)

This openness to the world is inherent to the idea of PI. In talmudic Hebrew, non-surprisingly, *praktmatia* – which is etymologically proximal to the Greek *pragma* – means merchandise and commerce.⁵⁵ The willingness to compromise, and to prefer the partial monetary fulfilment over a lethal and irreversible violence, reflects a recognition of the economic side of life. This aspect which is implicit in the Bible, and becomes explicit in talmudic literature.

A key example for assessing this transformation is found in biblical tort law which determines that the punishment for injuring or causing death is capital punishment (Exodus 21:22–24; see also Genesis 9:6). This legislation predicates the logic of *lex talionis* – “eye for an eye” – strict justice, and no mercy or exemption is possible. The Sages, as they aimed to provide a fair compensation to the victims, knew that the practical damage to person’s organ depends on their profession and income, which determines their monetary loss.⁵⁶ The Sages thus interpreted these biblical laws as to allow the possibility of financial compensation.⁵⁷ From a literalist point of view this is a hermeneutical scandal.⁵⁸ The intention of the Sages, however, seems to be an attempt to ameliorate, or in talmudic jargon: to promote *tiqqun olam* (see Mor 2011), namely to amend the world. This brings us to the fourth question of the status of economic considerations within Jewish law, which sheds light on the nature of PI and its place in Jewish tradition.

⁵⁴In Tosefta Sanhedrin (1:3), the sages disagree whether Judah’s deal was morally acceptable. Rabbi Eli‘ezer and R. Meir’s opinion is negative, whereas R. Yehoshua ben Korhah views juridical compromise positively. See Brezis 2015: 182–218.

⁵⁵As Joseph Manirav comments, the Greek word *πραγματεια* (*praktmatia*) was adopted into the Hebrew by talmudic sources: “This phrase [*praktmatia*] has three meanings: The first [...] commerce. The second reference [...] is merchandise. [...] [and the third meaning is] the merchants themselves” (Manirav 2009: 247). See also Jastrwo 1989: 1214–1215.

⁵⁶See Mishnah *Bava Kama* Chap. 8 and its vast commentaries in the Babylonian- and Jerusalem-Talmud.

⁵⁷BT *Bava Kama* 83b-84a.

⁵⁸From a strict *agapic* stance, on the other side, it is not clear how can humans repair anything, in a world governed by grace alone. It is perhaps due to this reason, that Martin Luther ultimately undermined the merit of deeds vis-à-vis graced intention. Compare Linda Ross-Meyer, “Agape, Humility, and Chaotic Good: The Challenge and Risk of Allowing Agape a Role in the Law”, in: Cochran and Calo 2017, 57–74.

6.3.4 *Trust, Responsibility, and the Role of Economic Considerations*

Talmudic culture views the market as a realm of voluntary exchange (as said above in Sect. 6.3.3) and ascribes a certain religious value to financial resources. The Sages, however, had no illusions about the self-sufficiency of the market. It can function if and only if it is occupied by responsible individuals and sufficient framework rules. At the same time, the Sages had no utopian view of human nature, and thus established these and other regulative institutions – most famously the *agoranomos*, or the official market-inspector, who was in charge of verifying the standardization of weights and measures of goods, their basic quality, reasonable pricing, and so on.⁵⁹ Such regulation was meant to protect the public and costumers more specifically from frauds. As Jonathan Sacks wrote, even the biblical legislation had already noticed “that an equitable distribution will not emerge naturally from the free working of the market alone” (Sacks 2003: 222–223).

Another vital resource of the market was, and still is, interhuman trust, which is a prerequisite for any democratic or humane economy (as in any other societal activity). Trust is the beating heart of the public sphere. As Eliezer Berkovits asserted, the public sphere and the market are the prototypical space where civic human life happens, and therefore no worthy religious pioussness can easily abandon the market as a concrete realm and as a discursive metaphor.⁶⁰ The market is metonymic to the real-world, to the trans-subjective and concrete reality.⁶¹ Human life must then be committed to the public sphere and to its dialogical, interactive character.

Strikingly, the very idea of measuring various and often conflicting religious commitments (an idea which is not trivial in religious traditions),⁶² is formulated in Jewish tradition in an economic jargon. In allusion to the early eighteenth century R. Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, author of *Messilat Yesharim*, Aaron Levine had succinctly termed such calculation as “weighing saintliness”⁶³ (Levine 2012: 3).

⁵⁹On regulative bodies in talmudic period, see the work of Daniel Sperber (1992: 26–47).

⁶⁰“One might give a definition of authentic Judaism by referring to a Talmudic saying. Commenting on the verse in *Psalms* ‘I shall walk before the Lord in the lands of living’ [Psalms 116:9], Rabbi Yehudah expounded: ‘The lands of the living? These are the marketplaces’ [BT Yoma 71a]. What is authentic Judaism? It is the application of Torah to the marketplaces of our existence, to the historic reality and uniqueness of our contemporary situation. This is the very essence of Halakhah. There is no other way to walk before God in the lands of the living” (Berkovits 1970: 76).

⁶¹Contemporary markets are conducted online as well, yet the realistic metaphor prevails.

⁶²Since weighing divine instruction entails that humans are capable of *understanding* God’s Word, at least partially, various religious thinkers deny the idea of weighing divine commandments. See Sagi and Statman 1995.

⁶³In Hebrew: *mishqal ha-ḥasidut*.

Economizing religion and religionizing economy thus apply, on such integrative religious approach, to both the holy and the secular.⁶⁴

Economic considerations thus play a significant role in Jewish tradition. They help in mediating or softening legal rigidity, or the stringency of Mosaic law, as we saw in the example of the *prozbul*. There are many other examples which demonstrate how monetary elements enable flexibility in Jewish law about otherwise rigid or irreversible conceptions and arrangements.⁶⁵ How is PI connected to that? The answer is that the legal subject of Jewish law is a participant and is conceived within the religious covenant with God as a partner, rather than mere subject to whom the law one-sidedly dictates (see Zarsky and Berman, [forthcoming](#)). As such, human beings are expected to act voluntarily, and to be motivated. Nourishing and constantly attuning and redirecting this moral motivation is thus at the core of Jewish ethics (Berkovits 2004: 87–136). In the economic context, this is where charity (*zedaqah*) and loving-kindness (*gemilut hasadim*, which abbreviates as GeMaḥ) play a role.⁶⁶ For PI, in and by itself, does not ensure that every member of society is capable of making a living, or that there would be no market failures. This is where the support for the poor by welfare authorities and charity funds becomes crucial (entering into the debate between Libertarians, Communitarians, and State welfarists exceeds the present discussion,⁶⁷ but PI is probably a vital resource for the success of either models).

A final comment revolves the relationship between PI and indebtedness. How can one appropriate the phenomenon of a person being obligated, financially, to another human being? Individualists (e.g., Cartesians) would protest against such a world, which seems to be the kind of world that we happen to inhabit. Yonatan Sagiv, in reflecting on the role of indebtedness in the works of the renown Israeli (Nobel-winning) author Shmuel Yosef Agnon, makes the following observation: “Defined by people’s *belief* in its value, money’s value is relational. To be in time, to be evaluated by history, necessarily means taking part in monetary circulation

⁶⁴This approach is often referred to in contemporary scholarship of Jewish thought as “Catholic”, in the sense of a quest for integration between individual and society. See Sagi 1999.

⁶⁵An interesting example is the *halakhah* that “A woman is acquired in three ways and acquires herself in two: She is acquired by money, by document, or by intercourse” (Mishnah *Kiddushin* 1:1). The intuitive reaction for the idea that money can procedurally “buy love” (to paraphrase the famous song by the Beatles) would be negative. However, once we recall that many religions and cultures consider the marital bond to be irreversible (think of the early Catholic marriage model, as in Matthew 19:4, and in the Judean Desert texts), the idea of divorce, which is conducted in Jewish law through economic mechanism – the man pays the woman, his former wife, the financial sum of the *ketubah* (divorce writ) – is revolutionary. See the discussion by Adiel Schremer (2015).

⁶⁶On the shift from the centralized ‘top-down’ model which underlies the biblical welfare legislation, to the talmudic world, which is communal-based, see comprehensively in the works of Yeal Wilfand Ben-Shalom (2014) and Benjamin Porat (2019).

⁶⁷See, from a Jewish perspective, the discussion by Moshe Hellinger (2010). Porat (2019, ch. 2) claims that biblical law mediates between what we view today as right- and left-wing economy.

and exchange”⁶⁸ (Sagiv 2016: 163, emphasis in original). As we saw in this section, in Jewish tradition there is similar notion about the possible accordance between commerce and trust, where the former is perceived as inherently dependent upon the latter. This notion is captured by the etymological connection between the Hebrew word *kessef* (lit. money, or silver ingot) and *kissufim* – which denotes the *yearnings* of the soul. In the same token (to use a relevant metaphor), the market is never *merely* a physical space – it is where human beings interact and where surprising things can happen, as Ruth Calderon (2001) points out when analyzing talmudic tales which take place (inter alia) at the marketplace.

Economic considerations, to conclude this section, play essential role in Jewish law. It is hard, if not impossible, to extract economic considerations from Jewish law because it is holistically entangled with considerations of morality, spirituality, and feasibility (Berkovits 1970). This pragmatism is predicated on an axiological holism, namely the dependency of values on facts and vice versa, which was discussed by Hilary Putnam (Putnam 2002), who objected the idea of formalistic- or positivistic-economic theory on the one hand, and the idea that valuation is unbothered by empirical facts. PI is part of this holistic recognition that neither materialism nor spiritualism provide an adequate working model. Rather, the middle-road signified by PI can be termed as *SPIRITERIALISM* – a pragmatist middle road between spiritualism and materialism, or a view of the two as holistically entangled. Worldly economic considerations are never “merely” economic. This brings us to the ending of this chapter, and to the relevance of PI to conscious capitalism more broadly.

6.4 Can Pragmatic Interestedness Contribute to the Idea of Conscious Capitalism?

In this chapter I proposed that PI, and classical American pragmatism more broadly, are helpful for thinking about economic morality. CAP was special in its opposition to the dominant Cartesian paradigm, which bracketed the human creature from her fellow humans, and from nature.⁶⁹ As the ‘bracketing’ model is still dominant in Western culture, PI and CAP are still vital for challenging some disinterestedness (DI) trajectories which are found in modernist cultures.

⁶⁸The fact that S. Y. Agnon’s figure is printed on Israel’s 50 NIS (*sheqel*) bill, marks – ironically, in some ways – the dependency of even great authors on “the vicissitudes of value, determined by economic, social, and cultural demand” (Sagiv 2016: 163).

⁶⁹For this reason, the association between CAP (e.g. William James), and between European Existentialism, as proposed by John J. Stuhr (2016: 207–221, chapter 10: “Absurd Pragmatism”), seems to stretch pragmatism beyond its relational and teleological tendencies.

One of the peculiarly modern predicaments is the deification of the very suffix ISM. Once an ideology ends with *ISM*, it is all too often becoming monolithic (or “phallogocentric”, in Derrida’s terms), loses its pluralistic and dynamic commitments, and most importantly its obligation to account for flesh and blood human beings. The same concern applies to Pragmatism, obviously, and also to Capitalism. Both are often hypostasized and fixated, sometimes as pejorative attempt to make them into a strawman. No doubt, there are some inherent problems with modern and late Capitalism: the rise of industrialism, urbanism and mass media resulted in alienation and societal fragmentation.⁷⁰ Certain economic forces surely contributed to that, but financial interactions, in themselves, do not *entail* human corruption. Questions of distributive justice are also distinct from the issue of the market. To keep guard of the danger of *Isming*, then, advocates of Capitalism (and of Conscious Capitalism) should be critical of economic injustices, and to be able to say what are the moral boundaries of markets.⁷¹

An understanding of the inescapable connections between interhuman trust and the economy is found in both Aristotle and in CAP. Aristotle had famously claimed that the monetary system was created in order to allow people to have a shared common denominator for trade.⁷² William James, for his part, used finance a means for portraying the pragmatist notion of truth as interaction:

Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’, so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other’s truth. But beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure. (James 1974: 138)

According to James, truth is in some ways relational, transactional, and interpersonal, rather than narrowly propositional. People work hard to earn money in order to secure means for surviving and fulfilling their needs. Once it becomes clear that money, in itself, is not the source of evil, but how justly and properly it is earned, used, and distributed, then a more productive societal discussion can take place about the ways for advancing human flourishing and fair society. Do Aristotle and James have much in common with Jewish PI as it was explored above? It is for the reader to decide.

⁷⁰On the need to consider the covenantal commitments more thoroughly than Max Weber did, see Stackhouse 2014.

⁷¹On the moral limits of markets, or what money cannot (or ought not) buy, see the work of Michael Sandel (2012).

⁷²“This is why all things that are exchanged must be somehow comparable. It is for this end that money was introduced. [...] for it measures all things [...] For if this be not so, there will be not exchange and no intercourse” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5:5 [Aristotle 2009: 89]).

6.5 Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter proposed that pragmatic interestedness (PI) is a possible axiological middle way between particularity-blind universalism (agapic, Communist, Sentientist, or else) and between egoism. In contrast with disinterestedness (DI), PI functions in Jewish tradition, and in classical American pragmatism (CAP) as a moral sensitivity which is pro-social, melioristic, and realistic. For these reasons, pragmatic interestedness may inspire those who seek a more conscious, humane capitalism.

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