



## BOOK REVIEW

*Solving Social Dilemmas: Ethics, Politics and Prosperity*, Roger Congleton. Oxford University Press, 2022, xvi + 451 pages.  
doi:[10.1017/S0266267123000287](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266267123000287)

Societies that have reached an advanced stage of economic and political development did not get there easily or quickly. And plenty are yet to get there. This reflects the fact that development only occurs to the extent that individual societies find ways to overcome whatever the obstacles are. According to Roger Congleton, these obstacles take the form of ‘social dilemmas’. (Some readers might be more familiar with the label ‘collective action problems’, and the various subcategories, such as prisoner’s dilemmas, assurance games, commons tragedies, and so on.) For Congleton, development is about finding ways to solve these problems. *Social Dilemmas* is an attempt to articulate and defend this position.

Congleton’s is an excellent book. Anyone remotely interested in the evolution of market society, democratic governance, and the place of individual dispositions in this evolution stands to gain much from a close reading. The book is also an excellent teaching resource: Its focus would align with a range of undergraduate classes in PPE above the most introductory level. Although it deals with a subject matter that is often subjected to technical modes of presentation, Congleton manages to avoid this where many authors might have succumbed, with graphs and equations appearing only rarely, and in sections or appendices that some readers or students might easily skip. The prose is remarkably accessible and has the effect of making a book of over 400 pages easier to read than many books half that length.

The unity of social dilemmas is, roughly, a shared structure involving a divergence between the actions that would serve people’s collective interest if enough people performed such actions, and the actions that serve people’s individual interests, given their reasonable expectations about how each other will in fact act. It is plausible that we all have a collective interest in living in any of the world’s developed societies over a hunter-gatherer or pre-industrial society of the past. But, in keeping with the standard understanding of social dilemmas, it does not follow from this that the people who lived at these historical phases of development had their immediate interests served by acting in the ways necessary to transition to a later phase of development. The challenge is to work out why and how development nevertheless occurred in some societies, and why these societies evolved sooner, and further, than other societies did or have.

For Congleton, the key to solving social dilemmas lies in humans’ capacity to internalize moral rules so as to be motivated to act in ways that can tend towards the collective interest. To internalize a moral rule, on Congleton’s account, is to have a disposition to act in a certain way in order to gain or avoid certain moralized feelings: A person who has a disposition to feel proud for being honest and guilty

upon lying has internalized a moral rule in this sense – specifically, a rule to be honest rather than dishonest. Societies in which this sort of rule gets internalized are ones in which telling the truth becomes ‘the right or natural thing to do’ (58). This enables a transition from a situation in which practices dependent on honesty, such as market exchange, go from being impossible or at least constrained to being more widespread and scalable. A similar story is repeated for the host of other social dilemmas that obstruct economic and political development at its various stages. The difference is just that different sorts of rules need to be internalized, and that social development proceeds in such a way that some dilemmas become solvable (and perhaps only come to exist) only after others have first been solved.

In developing this approach, Congleton advances a view about the causal primacy of individual attitudes, or ‘culture’ over more impersonal factors such as the efficacy of institutions, and environmental or geographic forces. It also advances a view about the relationship between developed commercial societies and people’s moral beliefs. As Congleton puts it, the point is to establish that because progress depends in some way on people’s ethical thinking, commercial societies have ethical foundations in an important sense (21). The first view can be located in a set of debates among historians and social scientists who engage in disagreement about the causal priority of cultural, political and environmental factors in driving (or impeding) social progress. Political philosophers, like me, are not really qualified to enter into these debates in a very useful way. So I will touch on this aspect of the book’s agenda only briefly. The second view Congleton takes, whereby his approach is meant to establish something interesting about the moral foundations of commercial society, is the more philosophically engaged, and controversial. I’ll say more about this one.

First, a bit more by way of an overview of the book. Given its length, Congleton sensibly divides *Social Dilemmas* into three parts. Parts 1 and 2 deal, respectively, with economic and then political development by way of applying the idea of progress driven by individuals internalising rules. Part 3 is rather different, being something of a historical survey of liberal positions in political philosophy.

Part 1 focuses on core elements of market society, or ‘commerce’. Here, elementary stages in development include a willingness to engage in the sort of cooperation necessary for capital accumulation, divisions of labour, and exchange/trade. All of this requires the internalization of rules conducive to trust and suppressive of fraud, theft and other factors that might keep people trapped in a sort of Hobbesian mire. Even if anticipatory violence is not the norm, efficiencies will be lost as individuals prioritize self-sufficiency over the gains enabled by cooperation. As well as rules relating explicitly to the more reciprocal aspects of cooperation, Congleton puts some emphasis on the emergence of norms pertaining to individual character, such as the praise or esteem awarded to individuals who display a ‘work ethic’ (90) or develop innovations (159).

Part 2 focuses on effective governance. The ethical dispositions that help solve more economic social dilemmas then lend themselves to political development in part because they serve as ‘prerequisites’ to law enforcement and the subsequent rise of democracy (178). In particular, the right ethical dispositions need to be internalized to prevent the expansion of government from creating overwhelming levels of corruption and rent-seeking. The emergence of democratic practices comes

next, with the internalization of rules for solving social dilemmas relating to majoritarian governance (199), and an overall tendency towards individuals taking greater responsibility for political decision-making by participating in systems of universal suffrage.

The survey in Part 3 begins with Aristotle and ends with Arthur Pigou. Aristotle is the only pre-enlightenment figure. After him, we get sections on Erasmus, Thomas More, Hugo Grotius, Pieter De La Court, Richard Baxter, Robert Barclay, John Locke, Montesquieu, Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Claude Bastiat, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, with Pigou last. The main point of this survey is to provide evidence that the evolution of moral and political philosophy was somewhat parallel to the evolutionary narrative of social norms in the book's first two parts. This is evident, Congleton argues, in the shift from protestant theism in the 17th century writings to a more secular orientation in the later writings, as well as a shift from conceptions of virtue that emphasize individual character development to ideas of the virtuous person as one who is well suited to cooperating with others.

Before saying anything critical, I should note again that this is an interdisciplinary book. Congleton's assignment of causal primacy to internalized rules or 'ethical dispositions' faces competing accounts that assign such primacy to different sets of factors. Congleton's particular view might face questions that don't obviously arise for its competitors. First, one might wonder about the applicability of a dispositions-based account like Congleton's to cases where economic development goes into reverse, particularly when this happens quickly, or in explaining why some authoritarian societies manage to persist. Part of what makes Congleton's account of development attractive is its ability to explain why development is slow: Norms simply take a while to be internalized by a critical mass of the population. Can reverses in development or persistent authoritarianism be blamed, as Congleton suggests, on 'a bit of bad luck in the evolution of norms' (428)? One might think it more plausible to look for catastrophic external factors like an ice age, the bubonic plague or foreign invasion. In more contemporary scenarios, the ability of contemporary authoritarian regimes to persist arguably occurs despite the ethical dispositions of their populations rather than because of them. After all, such regimes take great measures to violently suppress dissent, perhaps with the help of 'developed' societies that are willing to sell weapons and provide convenient locations for authoritarian elites to park their wealth.

Second, the book gives the impression that rules get internalized largely at the level of entire populations, rather than being somewhat linked to social classes or internalized subject to variation across different demographics. Congleton notes at one point that certain norms around courage and the ability to expose oneself to danger are especially prominent within the military and law enforcement (234). One wonders if similar examples of 'local' internalized dispositions might be found elsewhere in society, in ways that bear on Congleton's project.

Third, Congleton's narrative ends around 100 years before the present day (so long as one is talking about the most developed societies), with the emergence of universal suffrage and other key features of democratic governance. But it would be strange to say that, once a society reaches this point, it has solved all of its social dilemmas. Indeed, Congleton suggests that the series of social dilemmas is 'likely

endless' (257). This leaves the question of what is left. Contemporary societies arguably face problems of excessive competition for social status and other positional goods. These make for a particular category of social dilemma, including 'arms races' that involve wasteful or pointless competition. One view is that social norms have already emerged that act as a kind of 'arms control agreement' for such cases, for example when studious adolescents get labelled 'nerds' and busy adults 'workaholics'.<sup>1</sup> One wonders what Congleton might say about these cases.

A few thoughts about Part 3: Congleton takes the views of the surveyed authors to reflect common belief (259), though at times he falls back on more guarded expressions, such as 'in the air' (339, 413). The fact is that the positions these broadly liberal authors took sometimes were and sometimes still are controversial. The pro-trade views in Grotius and later in Smith were not exactly dominant, and politicians today still gain popular support by peddling mercantilist rhetoric. (It is worth noting that the actual subject matter has evolved too: The nature of trade and the distribution of its costs and benefits are somewhat different today than in the 18th century.) Some of these authors were engaged in more specific disagreement with other philosophical positions, for example Locke's rebuttal in the *First Treatise of Government* of the pro-monarchist views of Robert Filmer. Mill's defence of utilitarianism was aimed at contemporary conservatives who regarded it as the 'doctrine worthy only of swine'. And, of course, the 19th century had its share of influential socialist thinkers: Marx does not get a section or even a mention in the index, though he does come up in a footnote (365).

The more philosophical criticism that might be advanced about Congleton's book concerns what Congleton takes himself to have established as to whether commercial society has moral foundations. There is an important ambiguity between the idea that internalizing moral rules marks a way in which a population actually becomes more moral in some sense, and the more moderate idea that for a population or an individual to internalize a new moral rule is simply for it to *change its mind* about what's 'the right thing to do'. The tone of Congleton's book vacillates a bit as to which is the correct understanding of his project, and whether his ambitions fit with the first approach or the second, less committed one. The repeated references to 'ethical dispositions' as key to solving social dilemmas might encourage a reader to think that Congleton views economic and political development as enabled by a sort of underlying moral development. But it is hard to show that Congleton's actual arguments require commitment to this. And some formulations point towards the less philosophically committed approach. In the book's preface, for example, he says that the book 'provides a behavioural explanation for the rise of commercial societies' (xiv). This seems to downplay things somewhat. Congleton's arguments can probably get by on the assumption that talk of 'ethical dispositions' merely refers to internalization of rules by parties who thereby make some kind of moral commitment.

In the book's closing pages, Congleton makes a more explicit disclaimer about any relationship between a society's success in solving social dilemmas and the moral development of the people living in it:

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<sup>1</sup>See Frank (1999). For more general discussion of positional competition in market order, see Halliday and Thrasher (2020: Ch. 9).

The assertion that prosperity is at root an ethical phenomenon is not to claim that the persons in a more prosperous community are more ethical than those in a less prosperous community – although from the perspective of the norms internalized by members of a commercial society, it may appear to be so. It is, rather, a claim that some systems of rules and their associated ethical dispositions are significantly more supportive of commerce and economic development than others. (430)

But this only partly disambiguates: Maybe one set of rules, when internalized, indeed does not thereby improve the moral character of those who have internalized it. This is what Congleton disclaims. But one could still meaningfully claim that the set of rules in question is *itself* morally superior, or more conducive to justice. To say this would be merely to make use of a familiar distinction in political philosophy between justice as a property of practices or institutions (however broadly construed) and not a feature of individuals' own characters. And to say this is, importantly, to say something stronger than merely that people unavoidably make some judgement when internalizing certain rules that they are 'doing the right thing'. So there's a bit of ambiguity, in the end, about where Congleton stands.

I suspect that the book adds value to philosophical debates regardless of how this ambiguity is resolved. There are some in political philosophy who want to insist that market order, or 'capitalism', relies on an ethos in which fear and greed are central, rather than trust, tolerance and non-violence.<sup>2</sup> Market societies, on this view, are more about naked individualism than about community or fellowship between individuals. These views are typically articulated without much account of how capitalism (or, at any rate, developed market society) actually got here and what the internalization of moral rules might have had to do with it. If contemporary market society really does depend on fear and greed, then this might render mysterious the process by which it came about. Indeed, it has already been suggested that such a pessimistic evaluation of market society might have got things wrong about the kinds of rules individuals actually internalise in such society.<sup>3</sup> One feels that Congleton's book could have been brought to bear on this issue more fully, and that it has more to offer than was made explicit as to what kind of people we must be in order to participate in market society. Congleton at least provides reasons to believe that pessimistic narratives are not historically accurate. But he is a cautious writer when it comes to settling on a more evaluatively committed position on the kind of social development he seeks to explain.

To repeat my earlier evaluation: *Solving Social Dilemmas* is an excellent book that will find grateful readers across a range of academic disciplines, especially those within and proximate to PPE. The level of scholarship is something to be admired, as is Congleton's ability to communicate what are sometimes quite difficult and subtle lines of argument in readable prose. It is something of a relief to find a piece of work that combines accessible and incisive treatments of collective action problems

<sup>2</sup>Representative is Cohen (2009), which any reader in political philosophy is likely to be familiar with.

<sup>3</sup>See Brennan (2014: 66–69), compare Gilabert (2023: Ch. 8). See Otteson (2014: 12–18) for how Cohen's views might bear on comparison between capitalism and socialism. Evaluating Cohen's position is not wholly about whether the 'fear and greed' claim is right – see Ronzoni (2012).

with a perceptive appreciation of how relevant strands of liberal political thought evolved in conjunction with actual economic and political history. I suspect that Congleton's work will continue to have prominence and influence, even on those who prefer an account of social development that assigns causal primacy to factors other than the ones Congleton regards as crucial.

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