



## Conversations

# The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism

## An Interview with Thomas Raymen



In this issue's conversation piece, Professor Simon Winlow sat down to talk with Dr Thomas Raymen about his forthcoming book, *The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism* (Routledge, 2022). For a number of years now, Raymen has been writing about the harms that emerge at the intersection of commodified leisure and consumer culture, and like many others operating in the border zones between criminology and zemiology, social harm has served as the conceptual foundations to this body of work. But in his forthcoming book, Raymen begins to question and challenge the stability of these conceptual foundations. On what basis can we say that something is harmful? How are we supposed to judge between competing opinions on the harmfulness of a particular behaviour, practice, or industry? Can we avoid drifting off into relativism when it comes to judgements about harm?

In an age of deep cultural and political discord about what is and is not harmful, it is clear that providing answers to such questions is more important than ever. But in appraising the current state of the concept of social harm in academic scholarship and every-day life, Raymen finds a concept in an underdeveloped state of disorder, trapped in interminable deadlocks and shrill disagreements about what should and should not be considered harmful. Drawing on a novel blend of moral philosophy, social science, psychoanalytic theory, continental philosophy, *The Enigma of Social Harm* endeavours to explain the genesis of this crisis and identify what we need to do to resolve it, and in doing so travels from Graeco-Roman antiquity to the present day, exploring trends and developments in moral and political philosophy, religion, law, political economy, and culture that have contributed to social harm's present conceptual crisis.

Among other topics, Professor Winlow quizzes Raymen on some of the key ideas of the book; the nature of human flourishing and its role and relationship in defining social harm; whether

or not harm has any positive role to play in our lives; and whether or not fields such as criminology and zemiology should simply return to philosophy. [\*The Enigma of Social Harm\*](#) is available to pre-order now with Routledge.

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**Simon Winlow:** *Tom, thanks for agreeing to discuss your book, **The Enigma of Social Harm: The Problem of Liberalism**, which is about to be published by Routledge. The book falls right at the centre of this journal's remit, and so I'm sure many readers will be keen to hear about it. First, can you give us an overview of the book, and tell us why you were motivated to write it?*

**Thomas Raymen:** Thanks, Simon.

At its most basic, the book is about the health and condition of the concept of social harm. Does it have good, strong ontological and epistemological foundations? Which is simply to say: do we have a strong and robust set of means for determining whether or not something should be considered socially harmful that both academics and society more generally agree upon and use in everyday life? Is this set of means a good set of means and do we have good reasons for accepting them? Does the set of means we're using stand up to close scrutiny? Can it show itself to be superior to rival approaches for determining whether or not something should be considered harmful and thereby defeat those rival approaches through a logical argument?

And as you might expect, the book argues that in many important respects, the concept of social harm is not in a healthy condition. If all were fine and well, there wouldn't be much of a book to write! So what I argue is that the concept of social harm is actually in an underdeveloped state of disorder and confusion. And this is problematic because the field of zemiology and research from a broadly social harm perspective is growing at a rapid pace, despite the fact that the concept on which all of this research is based is lacking solid foundations. If you build a house and the foundations aren't strong, cracks begin to appear in the external walls, the floors might not be level, and if those problems get severe enough the entire house could collapse. This would be a shame for the study of social harm because it is a concept that I think is immensely important and promising. My critique of the concept of social harm isn't a prelude to throwing it all in the bin. It's a prelude to shoring it up and ensuring that the use of the concept of social harm remains meaningful. If the study of social harm falls into pluralistic incoherence, where the concept of harm can mean whatever a particular individual or group wants it to mean, you wind up with wildly conflicting claims in society around what is or is not harmful. I would argue we are seeing increasing evidence of the use of 'harm' and 'social harm' in this plural-individualistic way, and at that point the concept of social harm sinks into irrelevance.

Basically, everything I read and researched indicated that we needed to go back to the beginning and establish some firm conceptual foundations for social harm, and the first step in doing so is

to actually acknowledge that the concept is in a problematic condition. So the book is first about making the argument that the concept of social harm is in the unhealthy condition that I claim it to be. From there, it explores why the concept finds itself in this unhealthy condition, with the view that if we can understand where things have gone wrong and where the concept has run into problems, we can begin to go about rectifying those issues. So while the book does end with a suggestion of where we go from here in actually tackling this problem, and weaves these suggestions throughout the book, this is not its core purpose. The book is predominantly focused on the first two tasks. The latter question of how to resolve this problem is sizeable enough to be a book (or a series of books) in its own right, and it is a book I fully intend on writing in the future.

In terms of motivation, it was quite simple really. I was doing work around leisure and consumerism that used the concept of social harm as its foundational starting point. And as I reflected on my own work, I realised I was using the terms ‘harm’ and ‘social harm’ quite freely and in a relatively intuitive and uncritical manner. Why was I able to call this or that harmful? On what basis? How could I counter the arguments of others who might dispute my claims that this or that was harmful in a way that could logically defeat their position? So I began to interrogate the concept more and more and increasingly arrived at the conclusion that my research was resting on pretty shaky foundations. I stand by my previous work and maintain that it was decent, but it was a problem that the concept on which it was based seemed to be lacking any meaningful foundations. Part of the reason for this was that what I was lacking most was an adequate idea of human flourishing, of what is truly valuable and good in human existence. I was lacking an idea of how to live well and what it means to truly flourish as a human being. And I found that this absence is actually part of a very deep cultural, moral, and political philosophical trend, one that unavoidably prohibits there being any robust coherence to the concept of harm.

Also, over the past few years I’ve seen ‘harm’ and adjacent terms thrown around in both academic and everyday life in ways that are quite contradictory and, in some cases, arguably reckless. Today, it increasingly feels that as a society we are agreeing less and less on what should be considered genuinely harmful or harmless, and how to rank order harms and so on. So often it is like we are speaking different languages to one another when it comes to harm and are consequently becoming socially and morally unintelligible to one another. Anthropologists used to go off to far-flung places to research and understand cultures and ways of life quite alien to our own. Today, the alien is within, and I don’t mean that necessarily in terms of increased diversity, immigration, multi-culturalism and so on. Actually, what I’m referring to more are people with the same ethnicity, who were born in the same nation, who grew up in the same region, town, or city. People who, despite having all these shared characteristics, nevertheless seem to be becoming politically, culturally and morally alien to one another. Not just a healthy level of different, but fundamentally *alien*, strange, unfamiliar, and incomprehensible. And that strangeness to one another is often manifested most in questions around harm. So that further

convinced me that this concept required closer consideration. From there, my own curiosity led me down the rabbit hole and the final result was the book.

**Winlow:** *I like it. At the moment, any individual or social group, even those regularly accused of harming others, can proclaim themselves victims of harm because we have no worthwhile conception of harm and no systematic understanding of the place of its in our societies. Am I on the right track?*

**Raymen:** You're absolutely on the right track. In the absence of a robust conception of harm and human flourishing, what is and is not harmful is increasingly determined by the feelings, experiences, and interpretations of the sovereign individual, and this process itself is a product of liberalism's ascendance to a position of hegemonic dominance. You see this particularly in the realms of lifestyle, culture, sexuality, leisure and consumerism – those spheres of life which are positioned as the remit of free individual choice. This produces a very confusing picture. One of the examples I use in the book is where anti-obesity campaigns have been criticised as harmful because they allegedly stigmatise and invalidate the self-worth of obese people. Something which is focused on helping people by reducing the physiological harms of obesity is automatically reframed as harmful and destructive to their emotional wellbeing. This can only occur because we lack a clear, robust, and shared understanding of human flourishing, something which in the liberal universe is deemed as far too paternalistic and constraining. Instead, we have embraced a pluralised, privatised and individualistic approach to conceptualising human flourishing where the negative freedom of the sovereign individual is sacred, and they are free to decide for themselves whether or not they are flourishing.

In this context, how are we to decide between these two positions? We can't. We're trapped in this interminable cycle between two incommensurable positions. Equally, you see the problems of liberalism's deference to the experience and feelings of the sovereign individuals with regard to things such as micro-aggressions. A particular social interaction or behaviour is perceived by the victim as being laced with some form of prejudice and is therefore experienced as harmful. At the present moment, it does not seem to matter whether or not the perception or interpretation of events is accurate or not. In fact, there's currently no possibility of determining the harmfulness of the action in an objective sense because what matters is that the individual experienced the interaction as harmful. This is actually embedded in the Crown Prosecution Service's own definition of hate crime. I'm not for one moment saying that harmful microaggressions do not exist and that every claim is just the fictitious creation of the individual's imagination. I am simply saying that in the absence of a coherent concept of harm, and in a context that is so deferential to the sovereign feelings of the individual, we are relatively powerless to challenge or assess the validity of such claims, claims which often result in quite harmful consequences for the alleged perpetrator – loss of livelihood, abuse on social media, labelling as a bigot of some variety and so on. So harm can end up being inverted where, as you say, the perpetrator of harm can position themselves as a legitimate victim, and the eventual victim of harm is positioned as a perpetrator. So it's a serious issue, not a peripheral one.

**Winlow:** You've mentioned 'human flourishing' again, and I know that that concept has become quite important in the broader social harm literature. But what do you mean by 'human flourishing' exactly?

**Raymen:** Wow, that's a huge question. An almost timeless question. I'll do my best to answer it without complicating things too much. This answer might go on a bit though!

So the first thing that I think is worth saying is that in the book I use the term 'human flourishing' in a way that is quite different from how it has been used in the broader social harm literature so far. I don't know how you'd describe my approach. NeoAristotelian? MacIntyrean? It doesn't matter too much for now. But I would argue it is a more substantive approach to human flourishing, whereas the existing social harm literature has arguably used the term human flourishing in a more formal and liberal-individualist way that divorces the term human flourishing from its original Aristotelian roots and hollows it out. I understand people working in this field might balk at that 'liberal individualist' description, but I'll try to explain why I use that description, and hopefully that will clarify the distinction between these existing uses of human flourishing in the social harm literature and my own.

So as I just mentioned there, human flourishing is originally an Aristotelian term. Aristotle argued that the purpose, the *telos*, the end of life was *eudaimonia* or 'human flourishing'. Human flourishing is not just happiness or simply 'doing right', but rather *living well* and living a good life. Nor was human flourishing understood as something subjective that could be autonomously defined and determined by the individual. One's *telos* was considered to be objective, and the individual could discover their *telos* – that to which they should strive and would bring *eudaimonia* – according to the social roles they occupy, the social communities and communities of practice of which they are a member, their occupations, their pastimes. All of these things have goods *internal* to their practice, and if one pursues these goods and practices the virtues necessary for them, then they will flourish as human beings. For the Aristotelian or NeoAristotelian point of view, human flourishing is about the pursuit of excellence. Am I a good parent, friend, colleague, community member, or practitioner of this occupation, social practice, or pastime? And I don't necessarily mean excellence in the sense that you're the best at these things and achieve various awards and accolades, but do I pursue the goods internal to these practices to the best of my ability? Do I practice the virtues necessary for this? Do I practice these virtues in all aspects of my life? So human flourishing, from an Aristotelian point of view, is about knowing how to live well. It is about practical wisdom and the education of our desires. Knowing what is best and most valuable in human existence and knowing how to choose wisely. If one achieves this, they can flourish, and this flourishing is the end of human life. It's obviously a good deal more complex than this, but that description will do for now.

This is in quite stark contrast to how the term human flourishing has been used in the existing social harm literature. Take the work of Simon Pemberton. He has developed what is, in my

view, the most advanced conceptualisation of social harm to-date and he describes social harm as the systemic compromising of human flourishing. Others have done so as well, but his is the most developed and prominent. Now Pemberton's approach to social harm and human flourishing is rooted largely in the work of two guys called Doyal and Gough and their theory of human needs, which interestingly enough is itself based on the liberal philosopher John Rawls's theory of justice and his 'thin theory of the good'. Drawing on them, Pemberton argues is that in order for human beings to flourish certain basic human needs have to be met. He provides a range of examples such as health and healthcare, both physical and mental; economic security through stable well-remunerated employment; access to education and housing; freedom and autonomy to make decisions and live one's life as one chooses and so on. If a human being does not have these basic things, Pemberton argues, then they cannot flourish. And if they are denied these basic human needs by various political, economic, ideological or socio-cultural forces, then they are being socially harmed.

With all of this I don't quibble much at all, and in many respects, I admire Pemberton's work a great deal. Certainly, none of us can hope to truly flourish as human beings in any sense – Aristotelian or otherwise – if we do not have homes, health, education, stable employment and so on. Where I have an issue is that what Pemberton provides isn't actually an account of human flourishing at all. What is being provided here are a set of *pre-requisites* for flourishing, rather than an actual account of what it means for a human being to flourish, of what it is to live well, to live a meaningful life, of what our energies should be directed toward and what we should pursue and avoid and so on. There's a big difference. In Pemberton's account, there's no actual *content* to human flourishing. When it comes to what actually constitutes human flourishing, how we should live our lives and what goals and ends we should pursue in order to flourish, it remains up to the individual to decide. All that's really being said here is that individuals must have a certain set of human needs in order to enact their private and sovereign view of human flourishing. Therefore, this perspective is fully at home within the broader philosophical and cultural context of liberal individualism. This of course is entirely unsurprising given that the underlying influence of Doyal and Gough is itself informed by John Rawls's liberal egalitarianism. This is why I describe this as a liberal-individualistic conception of human flourishing.

The upshot of this, and why I take issue with it, is that it doesn't help us resolve the issue we discussed earlier of pluralistic incoherence when it comes to harm. In fact it perpetuates it. If we are saying that social harm is the systemic compromising of human flourishing, and we are *also* saying that what constitutes human flourishing is to be determined autonomously by the sovereign individual, then harm does come to mean whatever one wants it to mean. It also doesn't provide us with any means of resolving disagreements and conflicts when it comes to harm. When two individuals' differing and privatised conceptions of human flourishing come into conflict and jeopardise one another, whose human flourishing is to be privileged? How are we to decide between them? We can't. We have no means of doing so.

The other issue this raises is that if we don't have a shared vision of what constitutes human flourishing, how are we to consistently evaluate whether that flourishing is being compromised and being harmed, beyond the denial of certain pre-requisites? This prevents us from saying with any definitiveness that certain activities, industries, or practices are harmful in and of themselves and compromise human flourishing more generally. A good example of this are things such as gambling, social media, or recreational drug use. The harms of these activities are well-documented and frequently researched. But when individuals are confronted with this information, they often point out that only a small proportion of individuals become gambling addicts or die from drug use. Many individuals might say that social media, gambling, or drug use is actually essential to their own conceptions of human flourishing. As a result, the best an approach such as Pemberton's can do is show how such practices harms *some* individuals, in *some* situations, under *particular* circumstances by compromising some of their basic human needs. But it can do no more than this. So long as there are enough people whose basic human needs aren't compromised by these practices, so long as there are people who think that such activities are central to their human flourishing, and so long as we have no genuine account of what human flourishing actually entails that can contravene those claims, we can't describe those industries and practices as fundamentally harmful and contrary to human flourishing. We have no means for saying that individuals should not be directing their time and energy towards such pursuits. When we ask people why they gamble, take recreational drugs, or spend vast amounts of time on social media, we get a typical medley of responses such as 'because I want to', 'because I enjoy it', or 'because it makes me feel good'. These reasons aren't particularly good reasons and are deeply liberal-individualistic reasons. But without a more comprehensive notion of human flourishing, we're powerless against them, and have no means of saying that a particular practice, industry, or market should not exist or have any place in our society. Consequently, the practices, industries, and markets that inflict these harms can stay in place by default, the more extreme harms they produce continue, and we can only cross our fingers and hope that individuals avoid them. But their legitimacy, while perhaps slightly tainted, is not entirely ruined, protected as it is by the negative liberty of the autonomous individual.

So for all of these reasons, and many others that are discussed in the book, I argue that what we need is a more substantive conception of human flourishing, a conception of the true Good from which we can derive an understanding of harm.

**Winlow:** *So would you say that harm can be understood as activities that restrict this more detailed conception of human flourishing?*

**Raymen:** In a word, yes. I think we can. Some people have critiqued Pemberton for using "human flourishing" in his conceptualisation for harm because it introduces an ethical component that is seen as too subjective and messy, and that we should have a more constrained and rigid definition of harm. I don't agree with this critique whatsoever. The problem is in the other direction: not that human flourishing has too large a presence, but that the way it has been

conceptualised in the social harm literature is actually too anaemic, too insufficiently developed to be meaningful.

Harm is an unavoidably evaluative term. We can't rely on *a priori* definitions when it comes to harm. So often, when the concept of social harm is pondered, people ask "what is social harm?" For me, this is a stupid question, because the standard response would be "in relation to what?" So I feel we need to be asking a more epistemological question of how can we know, with confidence and good reason, that someone or something is being harmed? And knowing this requires us to first have a clear ontological understanding of persons, institutions, environments, animal populations and so on. An understanding of what they are, of their nature. We know that the global climate is being harmed because we know how it ought to ideally and normally function. We can say the same for animal populations. We have some idea of their nature, their *telos*, and as such have a clear idea of when they are and are not flourishing. Why should this be different for people, for social roles and practices, for communities and institutions? If we are to know whether or not someone or something is being harmed, we need to have some coherent idea of what it means for that person, practice, or institution to flourish. And establishing this knowledge of what it means to flourish is a fundamentally ethical task bound up with ethical questions. We shouldn't shy away from this. Ethics and morality is, and should be, central to the study of social harm. But not in an emotivist way.

**Winlow:** *I'm pleased that you stress the importance of understanding the nature and impact of harm, rather than simply advocating for the immediate extinction of all forms of harm. I say this only because the common call to immediately end 'harm' seems to ignore the complexity of life and suggests a rather blinkered attitude toward that which can be considered to be good. So, for example, many philosophers have noted that one cannot truly appreciate happiness, or satisfaction or contentment, without also having experienced sadness, dissatisfaction and struggle. Some of those things commonly categorised as 'harm' can yield positive effects, would you agree?*

**Raymen:** Yeah, so I actually talk about this very briefly in the last few pages of the book. It's a tricky one, for reasons I'll outline in a moment, and I actually think it's useful to be able to distinguish conceptually between harm and unpleasantness, which I think the current literature struggles to do. So you're right, in the *Ethics*, Aristotle suggested that the journey toward true human flourishing is unavoidably difficult, with pain, suffering, failure, and discomfort all coming along the way. Arguably, we can never lead a truly good life without some kind of suffering or unpleasantness. We intuitively understand this basic point with little cliché sayings like "if it's easy, it's not worth doing" and things of this nature. We tell our children these things when they're trying to master a particular skill and are getting upset, or where they aim for a goal and fail.

Where the problem arises, and where we have to be careful, is that this is susceptible to ideological manipulation. Genuine harm can be bent and recast as that which is unpleasant but



ultimately beneficial and necessary. In your own research on violence and trauma you'll have seen father's beat their sons in the name of "toughening the boy up". A violence that, through the ideological lens of the violent father, is transformed into the good, an unpleasant thing which ultimately shapes and moulds the young boy into something better and prepares them for the cold realities of the world. This of course is plainly absurd. Well-tempered, calm discipline, on the other hand, while unpleasant for any parent or child, helps that child to learn how to live with others effectively, how to live in a society of rules, to learn important social customs and so on. At a more macro level, we've seen in the past how rolling back of state support for the most deprived and vulnerable has historically been justified "for their own good", to rid the underclass of their feckless laziness and so on. Post-crash austerity was exactly this, right? Depicted as a necessary unpleasantness that we'd rather not endure, but that we must go through if we're to get the economy back on a stable footing and blah blah blah. Any economically literate person knows that this is blatantly incorrect and wrongheaded. But it's an ideological distortion. But this potential for the ideological distortion of something that is ultimately useful is true of many things. Fear is useful in many senses, but we see how it can be manipulated for ideological purposes. Despite this, it would be madness to just 'do away' with fear because fear keeps us safe in many respects. We just have to guard against this ideological manipulation to make sure that when we're fearful of something, we have real, genuine reasons to be fearful.

So this is where, once again, a robust and coherent account of human flourishing comes in. If we have a clear *telos*, a clear idea of flourishing and how to get there, it becomes far easier to discern between genuine harm and temporary but necessary unpleasantness. The former is that which prevents us from achieving the *telos* of human flourishing, the latter ultimately enables it. So this question and this distinction is actually quite important in understanding where harm begins and ends, and in providing some parameters to the concept. I could be wrong, but it's not something that the existing literature I've read has considered in much detail. The end result is a general social tendency that pushes to eradicate that which is unpleasant but actually good for us, because it has been erroneously conflated with "harm".

**Winlow:** *I was also pleased to hear that you draw on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. How does MacIntyre's philosophy influence your thesis? How can his work be brought together with an Aristotelian account of human flourishing?*

**Raymen:** Alasdair MacIntyre, for me, is one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. It amazes me that he isn't mentioned more frequently in the social sciences and criminology if I'm honest. His philosophy is so insightful, his writing is immensely readable (which isn't always the case with philosophy), and the content of his work is extremely relevant for where we are today. *After Virtue*, his most famous work, is probably more relevant now than it was when it was first published back in 1981. And encountering that work was a real turning point for me, and heavily influenced the way I went about the book.

And he basically opens that book with the claim that the language of morality is in a grave state of disorder. We lack, he argues, a shared ethical background or basis for morality, and instead possess a series of rival ethical positions whose starting points are fundamentally incommensurable. Each of these positions are internally coherent, but they're so incommensurable with one another that they cannot logically defeat one another, because their starting premises are so wildly different. So one of the examples he gives is the topic of abortion. You've got one side whose starting point is rooted in the right of the mother to choose. The other side argues for the sanctity of all life. That this is a human life we're killing and so on. What MacIntyre argues is that each of these positions, while internally coherent, cannot logically defeat the other, and therefore the individual engaged in this moral dilemma cannot provide good reasons for choosing one set of starting premises over the other. Each side provide their various arguments, but inevitably just end up back at their starting premises. Given that the starting premises cannot logically defeat each other, when we wind up back at this point two things tend to occur.

First of all, the individual has to make an arbitrary choice on the starting premises they choose to adopt. So take me, for instance. I'm pro-choice on the abortion issue. I can provide all the arguments for why women should have the right to choose and so on. But what I can't do is actually provide an answer that logically defeats the starting point of those pro-life individuals who say that this is a human life, that all human life is sacred and so on. All I can do is provide further arguments that are generated from, and justify, a position of individual choice. The arguments I make only 'defeat' the arguments of a pro-lifer if the listener already accepts the starting premise of the individual's right to choose. I saw this recently when there was all the scandal around the legal ruling in the US. Someone tweeted something along the lines of "*I respect people who want to be pro-life with their own bodies, but don't impose that on other people. Why can't pro-lifers just get on with that position?*" Ostensibly, this sentiment is "respecting" those who are pro-life, but they're "respecting" it according to a starting position of individual choice, and this isn't the starting position of pro-lifers whatsoever. If it were, there would be no issue. Pro-lifers tend to argue that abortion is a sin, that it is never acceptable, and that it is not our right to choose which foetuses live and which die. Neither side's starting premises can logically defeat the other on its own terms because they're so incommensurable.

So you're at an interminable deadlock, and at this point things become a bit tautologous such that deciding which set of starting premises to accept becomes a somewhat arbitrary choice, one that is based on feeling, intuition, my own personal biography, religion etc. To me, pro-choice just *seems* the right answer, but I can only give justifications from a pro-choice position. And this is precisely what makes these arguments so interminable. It's not just that they go on and on, but that they can literally reach no resolution, which is why on a whole host of issues you tend to see the repetition and assertion of certain mantras on each side, which are usually just a catchy summary of their basic starting premises.

The second thing that happens is that, as a result of these deadlocks, such debates merely become what MacIntyre describes as a ‘manipulative clash of wills’. And this is where *emotivism* comes in. Because individuals engaged in disagreement cannot logically defeat the starting premises of our opponents, what we increasingly see is highly emotive arguments. We see arguments that tug at the heart strings, try to inflict feelings of guilt or shame. Increasingly – particularly on social media on a whole host of issues – we see people try and denigrate the character of others, make them look evil or stupid or disingenuous. Wild accusations of racism, fascism, misogyny, transphobia are hurled at opponents in order to try and thrust them onto the back foot. This is designed to try and elicit the support of onlookers as well...if you sympathise with any aspect of this opponent’s argument, you must be x, y, z type of bigot. This is arguably truer now than it has ever been. We live in a thoroughly emotivist culture in which, increasingly, various moral claims are no more than the manipulative expressions of already and arbitrarily held personal preferences, beliefs and so on. People with knowledge of moral philosophy will know emotivism as the ‘hurrah-boo’ theory, in which a moral claim simply translates into ‘I approve/disapprove of this, do so as well’.

Given what we were saying previously, where questions of harm are unavoidably bound up with ethical questions, I argue that we’re in a similar position when it comes to questions of harm, and I apply MacIntyre’s discussion of this to the field of social harm and various zemiological issues throughout the book. MacIntyre himself is a Thomistic Aristotelian, and so argues that we need to develop a new account of human flourishing, a more objective and rational account that shows how a NeoAristotelian approach to morality and ethics can logically defeat utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics and so on. And I try to do something similar with social harm, and demonstrate how taking a broadly NeoAristotelian approach to the Good and to human flourishing is necessary if harm is to establish any coherence, and considers what stands in the way of this.

**Winlow:** *So, if I can briefly recap, you claim that we need to better understand what harm is and what it is not. We need a robust account of human flourishing against which we can better appraise harm. We need to engage with the field of ethics and morality to better identify beneficial social ends. We cannot continue to proceed on the basis that it is up to the individual to choose for him or herself what is harmful. Am I heading along the right lines?*

**Raymen:** Yep. Absolutely along the right lines there. And when it’s put like that, it sounds very simple. But in actual fact, all of those things you list off there are incredibly thorny issues. They’re deeply philosophical issues really, and the question of harm is a very knotty philosophical problem, one that hasn’t really been given sufficient attention in the literature. It is almost as if the field has avoided these kinds of questions, and just decided to get on with the business of investigating whatever type of harm they’re interested in, speaking about the harms of this or

that, without there really being a consistent, coherent, and solid conceptual foundation underpinning it.

In certain social harm texts, we're actually seeing prominent social harm scholars question whether or not the concept of social harm needs a firm ontological basis whatsoever. Which is strange given that one of the major rationales for developing the study of social harm was that it would be a field with a foundational concept that was ontologically superior to crime. This is what the editors and contributors of the first major social harm text, *Beyond Criminology*, agreed upon: that crime is a socio-legal construct, and is therefore vulnerable to more subjective relations of power and inequality which ultimately render it a somewhat arbitrary concept. So the purpose of this new field was, firstly, to develop a more ontologically robust concept that could act as an alternative or a remedy to this arbitrariness; and secondly, use this concept to draw attention to those harms which were previously excluded from view by the somewhat confining lens of crime or illegality. So the study of social harm is currently in a really strange place. It seems to be very keen on pursuing the second goal of exposing and drawing attention to new and different forms of harm. But simultaneously, it seems to be moving *away* from that first goal of establishing a firm, consistent, and coherent ontological basis for harm, and even questioning whether we need to do this at all. This, to me, is illogical. The second goal can only have any meaning if you diligently pursue and prioritise the first goal. Otherwise, claims of harmfulness can become just as arbitrary, if not more so, than labelling something as criminal.

**Winlow:** *One of the great benefits of social harm as an area of social research is surely that it is a necessarily interdisciplinary undertaking. To understand environmental, social, subjective or economic forms of harm, we need to roam across the social sciences and humanities, and in some cases STEM subjects, in search of concepts, frameworks and so on that can illuminate the causes, contexts and effects of harm. What do you make of claims that the study of social harm, or zemiology, can and should be considered a discipline distinct from cognate fields?*

**Raymen:** From a purely intellectual perspective, I have never fully understood the need for a distinct discipline of zemiology. As you say, the beauty of the study of social harm is that it transcends disciplinary boundaries. It encourages - even demands - that we all become polymaths and become learned in a really wide range of areas. This is a great thing when disciplines are becoming ever narrower, and when academics are identifying themselves in increasingly niche ways according to a very specific research topic. In fairness, I'm not sure zemiologists necessarily intended to set themselves up in distinction to all those other fields necessarily. It seems that their desire to establish a separate field stemmed more specifically from their beef with crime and criminology, and a desire to distinguish themselves from, or even usurp, that field. Although while I understand and can appreciate the arguments for that, I've also never been particularly convinced by them either. Perhaps I'm missing something there though.

That being said, I suppose what a distinct field does encourage is this kind of dedicated thinking about the concept of social harm that might not take place otherwise. I guess I envisage “zemiology” more as a collective literature that people from disparate disciplines - economists, biologists, computer scientists, environmental scientists, geographers, anthropologists, criminologists and so on - can dip into periodically and contribute to, while also doing other non-zemiological work in their “parent” field. Rather than zemiology being a standalone discipline in its own right, I guess I envisage it as a sub-discipline of *all* disciplines, if that makes sense. So you’ll have zemiological urban studies scholars, zemiological computer scientists, zemiological political economists and so on.

If I’m being brutally honest though, I’m not that passionate about these kinds of debates either way. So long as we are all doing good work where people are encouraged to stretch out into new terrains of knowledge in order to answer zemiological questions or address zemiological problems, then that’s all that matters.

**Winlow:** *Well, you have identified a range of problems with the contemporary study of social harm, and you’ve identified a range of new ideas that can support more robust and comprehensive analyses of social harm. I now have to ask, given the turmoil of contemporary western societies and the huge range of harms that are bearing down on ordinary people, what do you think are the most important areas to which social harm researchers should turn their attention?*

**Raymen:** Well we’re a society beset by crises on all fronts at the moment, so it’s not like there’s a shortage of serious issues to focus on. Climate change, energy security, food security, housing, supply chains, climate migration, labour exploitation, massive inequalities, social, cultural and political unrest, corruption, the emergence of a kind of neo-feudal era, digital technologies, digital surveillance and various regulatory regimes that can crop up through that. Take your pick, I could go on and on. But this is precisely why the study of harm is so important.

But we need to do more than just denounce how unfair all this is. I heard someone once describe criminology and zemiology quite disparagingly as “appalling-ology”, where we take a topic, document it, and the analysis effectively amounts to “isn’t it *appalling!*”. I think that’s a little harsh and does a disservice to a great deal of work in this field. But at the same time, that perception doesn’t just come out of nowhere either. I’ve probably been guilty of a bit of “appalling-ology” it in the past. We do live in an age of anti-policies and anti-politics. Anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, anti-capitalism, anti-gentrification. There are lots of movements calling for the abolition of this and that. Defund the police, abolish prisons. This kind of anti-politics can be quite problematic because I would argue it actually produces a libidinal attachment to the very thing one is against.

I talk about this a bit in the book. Various types of anti-politics always involve a strong libidinal investment in the imagination of a utopian future where the thing one is anti has been

eradicated. Once we have gotten rid of x, y, z, then things will be so much better, enjoyment will follow. The problem is that, as with anything, such futures are also bound up with fantasy, and fantasies can only be truly enjoyed when they are prohibited to us. Our enjoyment of the fantasy is dependent on distance from it. So when we achieve the abolitions and eradications that a particular anti-politics desires, proponents of that anti-politics are forced to confront the emptiness of the ideal, and the gap between reality and fantasy. So what does the proponent of anti-politics do? They declare that we're not 'there' yet. That we haven't eradicated or abolished the thing we're 'anti' to a satisfactory degree. That more work needs to be done and more awareness needs to be raised. Perhaps we redefine what we mean by certain terms in such a way that significantly expands their application. And this occurs because the existence of the thing one is 'anti' actually constitutes the means through which one enjoys the fantasy of its eradication. I would argue that, to a certain degree, this is exactly what is happening on the field of cultural and identity politics, to the point that it actually begins to inspire a backlash of real regressive prejudices. And around and around it goes.

So the field of social harm studies needs to do more than simply provide an exhaustive list of things for us to be against, but consider what we are for. It's easy to be against corruption, gentrification, climate change, fascism and so on. After all, who could be in favour of these things? But what are we really *for*? What kind of world do we actually want and imagine inhabiting, besides one that has simply eradicated the things that we're against? There's a difference here, I think. So this is a central question that should always be in the background and requires a bit more imagination.

**Winlow:** *So, we need another discipline! A discipline allied to zemiology, but one concerned principally with the good, with how we can truly live well, with how those things might be brought to fruition, and so on. But doesn't this discipline already exist? Aren't many of these concerns proper to philosophy, and moral philosophy in particular? Isn't the study of how ideals might be enacted, and how we can live good and better lives, fundamental to other fields in the social sciences?*

*I am being slightly flippant here, but this relates to what I believe is the hidden injunction issued throughout your book. That injunction is to get comfortable with complexity, to use diverse intellectual resources, to dispense with the performative radicalism that dominates the social sciences, and instead commit to fully understanding the diverse problems that beset our societies. The book, to me at least, can be read as a polite but serious critique of dominant modes of explanation. It is what we would've once called a 'critique of ideology'. It explores in multiple ways the inability of the ideology that dominates contemporary social science – progressive liberalism – to truly illuminate the problems of our time, or to offer us any substantial route away from our present impasse. As you've just said, so much of contemporary politics is negative – we are against those things we do not like but for nothing that can be named, described or brought to bear on the world. All of this is of course filtered through the lens of freedom: we are against those things we believe to impinge upon freedom, and very often, if we are for anything, it is simply a nebulous,*

*insubstantial conception of freedom, which basically means 'I should be free to do as I please. Nothing external to myself should have power or authority over me'.*

**Raymen:** With regards to your first point, yes, I think that in philosophy and moral philosophy we already have a field capable of doing that, and I actually think the social sciences need to return to philosophy more wholeheartedly. All social science disciplines are essentially rooted in philosophy, right? Social scientists know this, it's not news to anyone. But as we have created more and more disciplines and sub-disciplines these philosophical roots nevertheless seem to have been forgotten or relegated in importance. The social sciences have become much more empiricist. When social scientists draw on philosophy, they seem to do so in a very selective and instrumental way, drawing on a particular idea from a particular philosopher in order to support a particular empirical observation or to beef up an ideological point. Individual ideas from philosophy are employed as bolt-ons rather than as foundations, and as a result I find that there is a real lack of philosophical knowledge in the social sciences or an understanding of how best to engage in proper philosophical thinking about these kinds of issues. And this is understandable. It's not like we're ever really taught this stuff as students, beyond a cursory mention of particular figures or their selective use to illuminate a particular empirical point or topic. At the moment, it's a battle to keep more abstract theoretical modules that are specific to a discipline on our degree programmes, let alone introduce more general philosophy modules. I didn't learn much of anything about philosophy as a student. I've learned about philosophy in a more auto-didactic way through reading. But I agree, recognising that this field actually requires a return to philosophy would go a long way here, rather than always thinking we need to form a new discipline. What is zemiology really, other than philosophy and moral philosophy that is applied to various social problems? So yeah, I guess I see zemiology as a kind of applied philosophy, but an applied philosophy that nevertheless has to keep one foot in the realms of pure philosophy and abstract thought around ethics, human flourishing, human nature and so on.

To your second point around the hidden injunction of the book...I suppose you're right. I've never really thought of it in those terms as an 'injunction', possibly because it's not something I set out or intended to do. I wrote this book over the course of about three and a half years, and it was a very open-ended and indeterminate process, a real process of discovery. And as I started going down the rabbit hole, it became obvious to me that I needed to draw on a diverse range of intellectual resources. I needed to get beyond the social sciences really, and begin to look at and better understand religion, philosophy, and economic and cultural history and how they all tied together. I didn't see how I could write the book without looking at these things.

And doing that was a very enlightening process. It became very clear to me how the harms that permeate our society, and the current problems and difficulties we have in conceptualising social harm, are a direct product of the kind of philosophical liberalism that has long pervaded our society and our institutions, and has shaped our way of understanding ourselves, the social, and

the relationship between the two. So yes, the book can be understood as a polite cajoling to think beyond liberalism's domain assumptions. But I have to say, this is not a blame game. It's not a case of pointing fingers and laying blame at the feet of liberals and shouting "YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS!" I have never wanted to do that, because for starters it's unproductive, and secondly, it's never as simple as that. These kinds of problems are always multi-causal, so it is never as simple as finding a single villain that is responsible for all our ills. Yes, I argue quite firmly that liberalism is a major barrier to developing a shared notion of the Good; that it not only impedes but prohibits coherent conceptualisation of social harm, and the formation of a better and truly ethical world. But then the question arises: well if it's so bad, then how did liberalism ever come into being? Where did it come from? How did it achieve such success and why would anyone think it was a good idea? So I go to great lengths to demonstrate how liberalism itself was made possible by preceding forces and processes which unintentionally created the conditions in which liberalism could not only be conceived but flourish as well. This is why I delve back into histories of antiquity, religion, and economic and cultural history, because they're an indispensable part of the story. So that kind of villain-seeking is, for me, antithetical to academic enquiry. It's always been a case of honestly appraising where we are, what hampers our difficulties around conceptualising and preventing social harm, and then trying to understand how we have arrived at this position.

**Winlow:** *Ok, thanks for taking the time to talk to me and for offering fulsome answers to my at times rather anodyne questions. I enjoyed the book immensely. It certainly deserves to be widely read.*

**Raymen:** No problem, it was my pleasure. I hope plenty more people engage with the book as keenly as you have.