The quote that inspires a part of my title will be familiar to most readers. In the concluding paragraphs of the Preface to his Philosophy of Right, Hegel examines the role of philosophy in prescribing principles on how the world ought to be.1 ‘When philosophy paints its grey in grey’, Hegel writes, citing a part of Goethe’s Faust,

A shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only when the shadows of night are gathering.2

Hegel’s remarks on the role of philosophy at the end of the Preface illustrate a view that lies at the heart of the Philosophy of Right and indeed his entire moral and political thought: philosophy is ‘the comprehension of the present and the actual, not the setting up of a world beyond which exists God knows where’.3 But what kind of comprehension is at stake here? Although philosophy’s prescriptions cannot precede but only follow historical and political events, the mode of enquiry is still normative. In the paragraph immediately preceding the one we began with, Hegel insists that reason is not content with ‘that cold despair which confesses that, in this temporal world, things are bad or at best indifferent, but that nothing better can be expected here’.4 It is a kind of obstinacy that ‘does honour to human beings’ that they are ‘unwilling to acknowledge in their attitudes anything which has not been justified by thought’.5

Yet how can philosophy be normative if the ‘oughts’ to which it gives rise can only develop once the shadows of night have gathered? If the concepts that theorists deploy to interpret existing actions and events can only follow the events themselves, how can they also provide the critical guidance necessary to avoid the ‘cold despair’ that ‘nothing better can be achieved’? How does our interpretation of the world

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connect to existing institutions and practices in a way that does not merely consolidate the status quo but can also challenge its problematic features? Can we maintain that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk but also say something about where it should go?

Hegel of course believed that many of these answers could be given through a dialectical account of the process through which human freedom is progressively realised in the external world. In *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* I have invoked that same method to reflect on a similar set of questions but much more modestly, and in a limited way. My concern is with the relation between principles and agency as it applies to contemporary debates on the global scope of equality and the normative relevance of the state. From a methodological perspective, I defended the role of a dialectical approach (understood as the method of learning from trial, failure, and success) for examining different ways of interpreting global institutional practices, reflecting on the plausibility of the principles generated in the course of doing so, and examining the relation of those principles to existing manifestations of political agency. From a substantial perspective, I defended an egalitarian theory of global justice as the most appropriate articulation of the concerns and commitments expressed by agents involved in practices of contestation of legal, political, and social institutions. This defence was coupled with an endorsement of state-based political relations as the most effective vehicle for the potential transformations of those practices and an emphasis on the role of ‘avant-garde’ cosmopolitan agents to guide such transformations.

In the following pages, I address some outstanding questions concerning some aspects of my book, tackling first doubts about the method, the relation to alternative approaches, and its implications for political agency, and then turning to concerns related to my egalitarian interpretation of global justice and the idea of a cosmopolitan ‘avant-garde’ associated with it.

**DOUBTS ABOUT METHOD I: THE WIDE SCEPTIC CHALLENGE**

The dialectical method is introduced in my book as a method that allows us to reflect on different interpretations of the function and purpose of particular political institutions, and to orient us in selecting the most suitable ones. The criteria on which that method relies are distributed on three levels: (1) diagnostic; (2) innovating; and (3) heuristic. To summarise briefly, as far as the first is concerned, I have argued that ‘an interpretation (or family of interpretations) is more persuasive than its rivals when it identifies the grounds and scope of a particular conflict at the appropriate level of analysis’. As far as the second is concerned, I have argued that ‘a theory (or family of theories) innovates over an existing body of thought when it is able to identify principles that preserve the normative benefits of its predecessors whilst avoiding their pitfalls’. And as far as the third is concerned, I argued that a theory (or family of theories) contains heuristic potential when ‘its combination of innovating principles with conceptual categories already available contains also some guidelines for anticipating new, unforeseen questions and challenges’.

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One might worry that these criteria, are themselves controversial because, as David Miller points out, ‘they presuppose a standpoint from which one can say that one diagnosis is better than another, or that one proposal is normatively superior to another’.7 We can call this the sceptic challenge. The challenge typically takes two forms: a wide and a narrow one.8 On the wide sceptic challenge, we doubt that we can say anything, of any kind, about the greater plausibility of one normative outlook over another because we are sceptical of what David Owen aptly calls, ‘the authority of the mode of reasoning’ upon which this kind of reflection relies.9 On the narrow sceptic challenge, what we question is not so much the possibility of generating interpretations that claim (with good reason) to be more persuasive than their rivals, but the particular way through which one arrives at those interpretations (in my case, the critique of ideal and non-ideal approaches and the emphasis on the heuristic relevance of historical learning processes to generate defensible normative claims).

So for example, we might worry, as Pablo Gilabert does in this symposium, about how the dialectical approach ‘really accounts for historical improvement in political theories and practices with respect to their moral desirability in addition to (and in relation to) their political feasibility’.10 I shall address these questions in turn.

Let me start with the wide sceptic challenge. As already anticipated, the emphasis is here not just on the particular criteria deployed to identify some interpretations of social practice as more appropriate than others or on the more fine-grained principles for reform that one could obtain by doing so. It is rather on the difficulty of identifying an objective standard that allows us to say that one interpretation is more plausible than its rivals given the existence of disagreement among a plurality of agents and the potentially irreconcilable nature of their intuitions, beliefs and practices. Unlike scientific enquiry, critics argue, political theory (and indeed any kind of social science) can hardly claim to rest upon any brute facts that validate its findings independently of the role that human assumptions play in the making of such facts. All interpretations of social practice will rely on other interpretations, generating a circular process whose objective validation cannot be provided by appeal to external standards independent of the human mind, again, unlike scientific research.11

In its radical form, the wide sceptic challenge threatens any attempt to distinguish between belief, understood as a merely subjective stance on any given set of normative statements, and knowledge, which we often think of as belief that is also justified.12 I doubt that any of the authors in this symposium would, upon further reflection, really want to endorse wide scepticism, not least because the normative theories defended in their own work are all committed to claiming general validity rather than simply expressing a kind of subjective endorsement of a particular set of beliefs. This implies, at least if one is to take these theories seriously, that it is possible to argue that some forms of interpretation are more justified than others. It also means that settling such controversies is not simply a matter of individual assessment where ‘one man’s progress is likely to be another’s backward step’.13 Moreover, although the distinction between scientific enquiry and social science research is important, the most significant axis of that distinction is not the independence of
observation from the observers’ theoretical (or in our case interpretive) apparatus. It is now widely known from the non-realist philosophy of science of Kuhn, Lakatos, and others that scientific research also faces the problem of the dependence of observation from theoretical assumptions guiding particular research programmes.\textsuperscript{14} The main difference between natural and social enquiry concerns less the relation between observation and interpretation and more the kind of causality at the heart of the regularities that each seeks to capture: natural causality in the case of the former, and the emergence of particular institutions and practices through human intervention in the case of the latter.

In the methodological part of my book, I claim that the history of such constructions could be read as one of ongoing transmissions of moral norms whereby successive generations of human beings learn from the errors and successes of previous ones, and adapt or modify their inherited normative apparatus to different circumstances and environments. This view can of course be challenged at several junctures: first with regard to the assumptions about progress in problem-solving that underlie the selection of particular normative views; second with regard to the role it assigns to political agency in signalling the need for normative intervention; and third with regard to the kind of criteria it deploys to select between various candidate interpretations. But notice that mounting this challenge implies that we no longer doubt the ability of theorists to offer plausible, more or less progressive, more or less justified, interpretations of the way in which human agents have interpreted the function and purpose of their shared institutions. What we are sceptic of instead is the plausibility of obtaining that reconstruction by following the method of learning from trial, failure, and success and relying on the methodological principles that we declare to be at its basis. In doing so, we have moved from the wide to the narrow sceptic challenge, to which I turn next.

**DOUBTS ABOUT METHOD II: THE NARROW SCEPTIC CHALLENGE**

The narrow sceptic objection challenges not so much the possibility of articulating interpretations of social and political practices that are more progressive than their rivals but the criteria through which we arrive at such conclusions. In my own account, underlying these criteria is a view as a learning process in which normative principles emerge as a solution to conflicts about the way political institutions articulate the concern and commitments of agents subjected to them. Such conflicts, I have argued, are different over time, and so are the institutions and political norms to which they give rise. The controversial part seems to be the suggestion that we should understand these norms in an *evolutionary* way, with the most viable principles being preserved over time and the ones who seem unable to capture agents’ concerns and commitments being rejected and replaced by more responsive ones. Does this view, presuppose ‘faith’ in human progress?\textsuperscript{15}

When we speak about faith we tend to think of a kind of strong belief in a process or event whose occurrence is thought to be necessary regardless of the position of the
observer of that event, and, to some extent, even in the absence of evidence in support of that occurrence. I do not argue that progress is necessary; I only claim it is possible. Of course, the possibility of progress in the evolution of norms cannot be defended separately from the more general assumptions about moral agency that tend to drive normative theorising in the present. As Goethe has it in his *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, when we treat people ‘merely as they are, we make them worse; when we treat them as if they were what they should be, we improve them as far as they can be improved’. A very similar understanding of progress drives Kant’s defence of the possibility of progress to which I refer in this book. Granted, there is plenty of evidence that suggests that in ethics, and in political theory (which I take to be a form of ethics applied to political institutions) agents merely move in circles, destroying what has been previously achieved, and starting each time from scratch without transferring social and moral norms from one generation to the next. But there is also plenty of biological, geographical, anthropological, and archaeological evidence to suggest that human beings, and indeed our hominid and early human ancestors, have engaged in forms of socialisation and cooperation that developed altruistic behaviour for a very long time. A number of scientific studies indicate that such forms of cooperation have resulted in the emergence of norms that were successfully transferred to generations of descendants through the medium of language and culture. Therefore, it seems not implausible to say that these norms have produced social and political institutions to which humans have subjected themselves trying to avoid the blind spots encountered by their predecessors and investing in the positive experiences they have developed.

It is important to emphasise that once norms enter the social realm in this way, the institutions developed through them obtain self-regulating authority, a kind of authority that is to some extent independent from nature although causally related to it. That means that the capacity to subject to these norms and the skills and dispositions necessary to endorse and promote them become part of what it means to be human or, to put it differently, that the source of moral authority are humans themselves. But the institutions that humans create and to which they subject themselves are dynamic in character: norms evolve in interaction with the environment. Humans expand their knowledge and skills, they learn about each other, they develop technology and codes of conduct to improve their condition, and they put such knowledge to productive use. The social relations that this inherited body of knowledge is supposed to regulate progressively change their character, giving rise to conflicts and tensions that trigger new developments in the way institutions respond to the needs of agents subjected to them. They also lead to a modification in the content and shape of many of the rules that agents have endorsed to ensure their coordination and compliance.

The most plausible way to account for the evolution of such norms is therefore to see them as the product of a functional refinement. Function statements are common in the natural sciences, in particular evolutionary biology, where it is standard to refer to the function of a property to specify the link between the existence of a biological feature and the mechanism of selection (i.e. feathers were selected in early birds for their role in thermoregulation). However, function statements have
also been extended to social and political relations and to the development of ethical practices.\textsuperscript{22} Here, the evolution of moral and political norms can be plausibly analysed as a contribution to securing coordination and compliance, features without which the life of a plurality of agents in conflict with each other would be, as one famous description goes, ‘nasty, brutish and short’. To put the point more simply, one basic function of ethics is often thought to be the remedying of altruism failures.\textsuperscript{23} One basic function of justice (as a form of ethics applied to political institutions) might be to regulate access to the benefits and burdens of cooperation in a way that avoids conflict and secures compliance.\textsuperscript{24} The coercive use of power is one way to ensure that this function is discharged. But relations between human agents are mediated in different times and places by different normative principles, reflected in the design of the basic institutions regulating their life. They inform different views on how power should be exercised, by whom and through what means. Therefore, generally speaking, we might say that progress in ethics and in political philosophy is the result of cumulative processes of refinement in the way normative principles inform institutions that help discharge particular basic functions.

My book claims that, at any given time and place, we can identify the principles that allow these basic (and other non-basic) functions to be discharged by reflecting on the structure of social roles, and the position of different agents in society vis-à-vis the system of rules that governs their lives. It also claims that we need to observe instances of challenge to such systems with a view to scrutinising whether we should uphold existing interpretations of their function and purpose or whether we ought to reject, refine or replace them with more adequate ones. The claim is that a progressive normative view (or family of views) is one that contributes to revising and modifying these principles so that the function of particular moral and political norms is discharged by institutions in a way that preserves the benefits of its rivals but avoids their pitfalls. A normative view is regressive if it fails to do that.

All this, I hope, helps clarify in what way the dialectical method contributes to reflect on how (1) particular social and political institutions discharge certain normative functions, (2) examine the adequacy of different interpretations in terms of their contribution to this functional refinement, and (3) assess the challenges they encounter and the principles they give rise to. It should also explain how in asking whether a normative view shapes institutions that adequately discharge a particular function we are not interested simply in the political feasibility and motivational sustainability of that view but also in its moral desirability.\textsuperscript{25} Gilabert argues that it is not clear in what exactly the dialectical approach is supposed to identify trials, failures, and successes. Since we are thinking about normative progress in a problem-solving manner, the exact dimension with regard to which we ask whether an institution adequately discharges a particular function depends on the nature of the problem to be solved. In the case of the global justice debate, which is also my concern in the book, we are interested in how a particular normative property, namely justice, is reflected in the different interpretations of the function and purpose of the political institutions seeking to realise it. We start with two candidate interpretations of the background problem, one which sees the problem only as one
of lack of access to a sufficient range of goods (whatever we might take their metric to be) and one that sees it also as a problem of relative deprivation on a global scale. We then ask which of these two interpretations performs better in identifying the causes of conflict and offering remedies that preserve the benefits of rival alternatives whilst avoiding their pitfalls. After examining the circumstances under which the need for global justice arises, the agents affected by such conflicts, and the nature of the relation between absolute and relative deprivation, we conclude that an egalitarian set of principles stems from a more appropriate view of the function and purpose of existing institutions and therefore is to be preferred.

I think Gilabert is right to point out that there is some tension in this book on how this assessment exactly works, in particular with regard to the value of ideal theory when it comes to identifying fundamental normative properties whose functional refinement is to be sought. I think he is also right to say that a suitably modified version of reflective equilibrium (i.e. in its deliberative rather than descriptive version) may be an appropriate tool for reaching some similar conclusions and that it may have significant overlaps with the dialectical method.26 Provided we are willing to understand the process of reflective equilibrium as one that is historically and politically constructed, Gilabert’s suggestion is plausible. But I would be reluctant to concede that the dialectical method is simply a case of applied ideal theory. Of course, it is difficult to deny that at the stage of comparing different interpretations of the function and purpose of particular institutions we are concerned with moral desirability, that is the ability of a theory (or family of theories) to deliver normative principles that make an adequate contribution to the functional refinement of particular norms. As I clarify in this book, issues of political feasibility and motivational sustainability become crucially relevant once we raise the question of how to reform existing institutions and practices compatibly with such normative requirements, that is when we are interested in solving the problem of agency.

Yet to concede the relevance of moral desirability does not imply that it is sufficient to apply ideal theory to the interpretation of social practices in order to examine whether they contribute to a functional refinement of certain norms. The reason we select ‘justice’ as the relevant normative property, and the lack of justice as the problem to be solved is not that we are guided by an ideal about the kind of property that deserves normative inspection (i.e. justice) which is itself unmediated by social practice. The relation is again here, dialectical. In my view, our focus on justice is the result of a long learning process through which human beings have historically discovered a conceptual framework that allows them to cooperate with each other, make intelligible claims, give reasons for action and shape institutions that reflect such claims in the way they are organised. Justice is a functional response to a background problem. Normative properties on my account are problem-driven; they retain their relevance for as long as they contribute to improve certain functions, and form the basis on which to seek guidance for their refinement. Thought experiments, abstraction, and idealisation are important tools if they speak to such problems. If they do not, the results we obtain from them have very little relevance for us.
In what way then does the dialectical method represent a genuine integration of ideal and non-ideal concerns? To schematise somewhat, ideal theories are typically understood to be truth-seeking; non-ideal theories are more interested in action-guiding. The dialectical method is interested in both: the relevance of fundamental normative properties is not context-dependent and compartmentalised. Although the functional refinement of norms is historically generated, it is part of a cumulative process that tends to produce justified beliefs through a reliable process of trial, failure, and success. Truth is therefore understood as that which we approach in the course of making progressive transitions, a set of beliefs that obtains objective validity ‘in the process of its validation’. A body of thought retains this validity for as long as it is not challenged, and it is not challenged so long as those who entertain it converge on the importance of continuing to uphold the claims that constitute that justified set of beliefs. Of course, in order to be reliable, this process assumes certain rational constraints on the conditions under which agents make normatively relevant decisions, a point to which I shall return in the next section. What matters for now is the fact that the result of our progressive transitions is not only important for us here and now but becomes part of a common pool of normative resources to which successive generations of human beings can appeal in guiding their actions. But there is not a single principle (or set of principles) that could be called true or false regardless of the role it plays in the relations among human agents.

Therefore, I disagree here with Gilabert’s defence of ideal theory. On my view, a principle is desirable if appealing to it orients the construction of institutions that perform better than competitors in responding to the concerns and commitments of agents subjected to them. That is to say, the principle belongs to a family of theories that can diagnose more appropriately, innovate better, and contain more heuristic potential compared to rival alternatives. But notice that to say that a principle must respond to concerns and commitments of existing agents is not to say that these agents must be already aware of these principles, or that all we need to do is passively observe their activity in order to derive normative guidance from it. The kind of enquiry oriented by the dialectical method is distributed at different stages and although we are interested in the moral desirability of particular principles, the criteria for what counts as morally desirable are constructed inter-subjectively and historically. Thus, to ask whether a principle is true or false even if there is absolutely no link between that principle and the concerns and commitments of agents in society, is legitimate but—I would insist—irrelevant. To explain that statement better, I need to say more about the way I think about the relation between principles and agency in the different stages of theory construction.

AVANT-GARDE AGENTS, CIRCULARITY AND THE ARROGANCE OF THE PRESENT

I argued that the interpretation of the function and purpose of political institutions should be sensitive to the historical process of functional refinement of particular
norms. The more these norms are inter-subjectively endorsed by agents and reflected in the social and political institutions they collectively construct, the more they are justified, the more justified they are, the greater their contribution to moral and political progress, the more progress we make, the closer we are to a concept of truth as gradually constructed through trial, failure, and success. At this point an obvious objection arises: we do not know if a particular practice is progressive, unless we know the direction of its movement, and we can only know if a particular direction is right or wrong if we have access to an independent standard that tells us where to go.29 Obviously, this is not troubling for ideal theorists (though it does confront them with the problem of saying why we should believe the validity of that independent standard in the first instance). In my case however, the problems are different. If we want to resist the temptation of saying that principles come first and insist on the dialectical relation between principles and agency, we must be able to rely on actual historical practices as making an important contribution to carrying forward the functional refinement of norms. But it seems that proceeding in a fallibilistic way, which takes seriously what we learn from history in supporting or challenging a particular interpretation of the function and purpose of certain institutions, raises another difficulty. Is the historical survival of a specific moral outlook sufficient evidence of the plausibility of the norms underpinning it?30 Could not a particular set of norms have prevailed simply through the coercion of those who were subjected to it by another powerful group, or by manipulating their preferences and desires, or by the sheer elimination of alternatives?31 And would not our current beliefs and practices then simply reflect the outcome of that power struggle rather than anything more dignified from a normative perspective? We can call this the arrogance of the present objection.32

The arrogance of the present objection would have force if we were willing to recognise as valid any criteria on the circumstances under which agents uphold a particular interpretation of the function and purpose of their institutions. But we need not to be so charitable on the interpretation of this point. We could say that a normative change counts as progressive only if successive generations are willing to endorse the norm in question even in circumstances that display none of the constraints of the original conditions under which the norm emerged. To explain this point, let me give an example that returns to the idea of progress as a process of refinement of basic functions. One basic function of justice, we said, might be to regulate access to the benefits and burdens of cooperation in a way that avoids conflict and secures compliance. The function will be served through different social and political arrangements, based on different regulating principles, at different points in time. Now suppose that one such set of institutions generates norms of deference to authority based on birth-rank. Suppose further that this is the only conceivable norm at that time. Thanks to the power and coercive means of those belonging to a higher rank (call them masters), those belonging to a lower rank (call them serfs) endorse the norm. Serfs may be dissatisfied but we have stipulated that alternative visions are not yet epistemically available to them and they do not have the means to experiment with simply subverting the norms. Now, suppose that for
whatever reason (natural catastrophe, wars, enmity with their neighbours) the society of serfs is challenged and a crisis erupts. People start questioning the way they have organised their basic social institutions and come up with alternative models. The question is, given these alternatives, would the next generation of members of that society continue to endorse norms of deference to authority based on birth-rank? Or, to put the point slightly differently, would the norm continue to be upheld despite the disappearance of the external constraints (subjection to domination, epistemic ignorance about alternative views, inability to act) on the action of previous generations of serfs? If the answer is no, it means that a body of norms that was at one point contributing to the functional refinement of an ethical code no longer serves its historical role.

Therefore, this test places constraints on the conditions on the basis of which we assess different interpretations of the function and purpose of particular institutions, using the method of trial, failure, and success to examine the solidity of such interpretations and the principles on which they are grounded. But this argument raises another important question: it seems to only give us post-factum reconstructions of learning processes we seem to have now internalised but is unable to generate critical insights applicable to the future. Or, to go back to where I started, the argument only reveals where the owl of Minerva is flying but is unable to tell us anything about the direction of its flight.

Let me address this objection by going back to the book’s case study: the problem of global justice and the role of avant-garde political agency in the defence of an egalitarian account of the function and purpose of global institutions. On the account I defend, we being by observing challenges of the function and purpose of basic social and political institutions advanced by different political agents. We try to understand the concerns and commitments of such agents, the reasons behind the claims they make and how (if at all) those reasons might connect to core norms consolidated through past learning processes. One outcome of this pre-interpretive observation will be to exclude from normative attention some movements and groups, typically only those that endorse views that we now find uncontroversially flawed (e.g. those advocating racist principles and reforms). To say that such agents are excluded from normative attention means that they will have no role to play in the innovating stage of the process, when it comes to incorporating some of their claims in an improved account of the function and purpose of the major social institutions.33 This still leaves plenty of scope for directing attention to a wide range of agents who might (more or less consciously) challenge the existing status quo and who might (for different reasons) find themselves in circumstances of global injustice. In my book I called all such agents avant-garde agents, and that might have been misleading. Although it is important to pay attention to existing expressions of political agency, which of these we call avant-garde agents proper depends on the balance of their claims in a normative account that is significantly dependent on political practices at the diagnostic stage of the enquiry but not entirely subjected to them when it comes to the formulation of principles in the innovating stage. Indeed, at the pre-interpretive stage we ought to take seriously all plausible candidate movements challenging the
Once appropriate principles necessary to remedy defects in existing political institutions are identified, we can restrict further the domain of application of such principles by identifying the agents who will be responsible for promoting them further (and making them politically feasible and motivationally sustainable). Even at this stage, it would be foolish to deny that people might reasonably disagree on which agents deserve the label of ‘avant-garde’ and which others do not. Where that disagreement remains, the issue can only be settled through democratic adjudication, and normative theory will have little more to say.

If the process of normative enquiry is distributed at different levels (diagnostic, innovating and heuristic), we can avoid the circularity objection that Miller raises by specifying the relation between principles and agency with regard to each of these stages. Instances of political practice direct our attention to the kinds of problems that need to be solved (diagnosis), theorists develop principles that contribute to the functional refinement of the norms underpinning such practices (innovation), agency and principles work together to change the shape of the social and political institutions reflecting newly articulated norms and leading to new developments (heuristic potential). All of this does not imply, as Rahul Rao argues in his contribution to this symposium, that there is a hierarchical division of labour that leaves the elaboration of principles to normative theorists and relegates real-world political agents to the role of ‘foot soldiers in the normative theorist’s project’. That project is developed in dialogue with the concerns of such agents and both these stages, that of principle identification and that which is concerned with their promotion, are equally important. If all this sounds plausible, it is difficult to see how my account fails to capture the role of political theory in ‘constituting relevant avant-gardes’, as Owen underlies. If my theory has any merit, it is that of insisting on the equal importance of questions of principle and questions of agency within a comprehensive account of global justice, which tries to be explicit on the modalities of interaction between the activity of political theorists and that of other agents by whom that activity is inspired and to whom it is directed. Of course, we will always be concerned with whether the agents contributing to our diagnosis of dysfunctional political institutions are adequately represented also at the innovation stage. Both Owen and Rao are right to press in this direction. But that concern can easily be overstated, and it is difficult to see how to address the question other than by either refining the methodology so as to make sure that our account of history is not biased (as I suggested above) or, if that is deemed impossible, entirely abandoning activist political theory. Of course one can argue, as Owen does, that we can avoid some of these problems by aiming at activist political theory in a re-descriptive rather than action-guiding mode, renouncing normative prescriptions and focusing instead on educating agents about examples of successful and failed instances of transformative political agency as well as illustrating the main threats to their activity. But to the extent that fulfilling this role also requires endorsing certain core principles as the basis against which distinctions of, say, successful or failed emancipatory political agency are made, re-descriptive (or genealogical) activist political theory encounters difficulties similar to its prescriptive counter-part.
Finally, I am very sensitive to Gilabert’s point about the historically troubling relation of theorists with avant-gardes, and the risk of paternalism, instrumentalisation, or even manipulation of such agents in particular circumstances. But I am reluctant to concede that such risks are intrinsically characteristic of the relation between theory and avant-garde agency and I doubt they can be overcome by constructing differently (or making clearer) the link between moral desirability and political feasibility, as Gilabert suggests. These pathologies typically develop in cases where institutions lack what we might call a democratic ethos, where politics is unaccountable to the public, and/or where the contribution of civic practices tends to be replaced by the operations of technocratic elites. But, I suspect, all these are contingent problems, having to do more with the nature of political reality than with the theoretical construction of the way in which principles ought to inform agency. Normative theorists can do very little (if anything) to eliminate the contingent risk of such occurrences except perhaps (and only in a very limited way) by advocating political theory in an activist mode.

GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM AND THE COSMOPOLITAN AVANT-GARDE

In this section, I would like to discuss some critiques to the particular account of global justice advanced in my book, more specifically my defence of global egalitarianism at the level of principles and the emphasis on the role of state-based associative relations as the main agents of cosmopolitan progress. Rao is right to point out that several contributors to the global justice literature have also emphasised the role of states as important agents of global justice. However, as I see it, these concessions have mostly been based on pragmatic considerations and without the attention to the question of transformative political agency that they obtain in my account. On the other hand, my defence of egalitarian principles, also shared with many other fellow-cosmopolitans, is not grounded on arguments from the original position (as is typical in the existing literature) but on the analysis of the causal links between absolute and relative deprivation for a fundamentally appropriate account of the function and purpose of global institutions. For example, my discussion of global goods with a positional nature is intended to convince those who endorse modest (i.e. sufficientarian) principles of global justice that, given the nature of the relation between absolute and relative deprivation in the distribution of such goods, egalitarian theories fare better than their statist competitors in providing a fundamentally appropriate interpretation of the circumstances of global injustice when it comes to their diagnostic capacity, innovative potential and heuristic role (as discussed above).

The example used to illustrate the causal link between absolute and relative deprivation is power, and the positive argument offered in the last part of this book is that if you are a sufficientarian, you should also be committed to (at least) the proportional equalisation of state power. David Owen and Chris Armstrong offer
valuable insights on the implications of my argument and I am very open to their suggestions. As I clarified in the book, the example of state power is merely intended to be illustrative of the properties of goods with a positional nature and seems to me to provide a plausible empirical account of one important dimension of interaction in the international sphere, one that many statists should also find appealing. However, I do not argue that the distribution of state power is the only or most important example of the distribution of goods with a positional nature. I am therefore open to Owen's remark that we could reflect on the more specific features of the institutions responsible for a global egalitarian distribution by combining considerations concerning what is owed to states as unitary agents with considerations that apply directly to their citizens considered as individuals (although in cases of conflict between the two, the latter should have priority). Owen is also right to suggest that since power can be exercised in concert with others, we need to be sensitive to the way in which it is wielded by coalitions of states (or other relevant agents in case we want to extend the argument) and to how the result of such aggregations might affect final distributive outcomes. All this is to say that I agree with critics that my account, which was intended to be merely illustrative on this point, may well need more work to become institutionally operative. But to say that an argument is incomplete is different from saying that it is unpersuasive. It is also different from saying that completing the account will have non-trivial implications for the principles that I endorse overall. Here, I do not think that the conclusion of Owen's argument follows from the premises. Unless we are given some idea on why the argument is not persuasive (as opposed to merely incomplete) and of what these non-trivial implications might be, the bottom line is difficult to assess.

The 'incompleteness' objection is developed further in Armstrong's contribution to this symposium. Armstrong rightly points out that one important implication of my argument in favour of global egalitarianism is to invite us to see political and economic inequality as closely connected to each other. But the nature of the link is empirical: in global circumstances of injustice, the effects of economic inequalities between states feed into political inequalities which in turn are responsible for the emergence of both relative and absolute deprivation. Therefore, although one way to address this problem is remedying such inequalities at the global level, another equally plausible solution (at least theoretically) might be to insulate them from each other so as to break the circle of interdependence. In its radical form, the objection would lead to the defence of a global autarchical society, a model that although many contemporary liberals would be loath to endorse had many champions in the past (Fichte's defence of The Closed Commercial State being perhaps the most famous example). But how plausible is that model? Not very plausible, as even the staunchest critics of globalisation were quick to recognise. In the words of one Karl Marx, the exploitation of the world-market 'has given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country'. The effects of past empirical interdependence have triggered a change in the nature of needs to be satisfied, '[i]n place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes'.
Material production is in turn related to intellectual exchange, ‘[t]he intellectual creations of individual nations become common property’, ‘[n]ational one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible’. All this is to say that returning to the old world of isolated communities and autarchic production, of corporate guilds and apprentice structures is not only illusory but probably also undesirable. The statist critics with whom I am concerned in this book may not agree with Marx that the cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which the bourgeoisie batters down all Chinese walls. But they would certainly share his diagnosis that once agents develop new needs it is difficult to return to a functionally inferior system of production and, I think, they would agree with me that the objection from ‘insulation’ fails, at least in its radical form.

What about a more modest reform of the international system, seeking to remedy political inequalities amongst states so as to insulate their activities and prevent them from having a trickle-down effect on the relative distribution of positional goods? Armstrong himself suggests a number of difficulties with that proposal, and I tend to agree with the arguments he proposes. Over and above such difficulties, I think the moderate version of the objection puts statist critics in a difficult spot. In their domestic theories of justice, these critics tend to endorse egalitarian distribution as an effective way to ensure a fair distribution of roles and positions, arguing that simple equality of political rights would not be enough to ensure that the interests of the most vulnerable agents in society are adequately represented: distributive justice is also required. Why then think that the solution of offering equal political rights for states is immune to similar pressures in the international sphere, given the analogous way in which the market operates in both contexts? As I tried to explain in this book, the properties that distinguish state-based associative relations from those that subsist in the international sphere matter only from the point of view of agency, not from the point of view of what justice requires at the level of principle. By requiring us to drop the commitment to egalitarianism that characterises the appropriate interpretation of the function and purpose of political institutions at the domestic level, liberal egalitarians at home become libertarians abroad. I do not think I am alone in struggling to see what justifies their claims in this respect.

Finally, let me address some questions about the nature of my defence of states as important agents of global justice. To being with Rao’s remarks, as I try to clarify in the book, state-based relations are the most important vehicle through which we can seek change, both from the point of view of what makes certain principles feasible and from the point of view of their motivational sustainability. States matter only for so long as they serve to discharge particular functions, crucially: securing coordination and compliance in a particular territory. They are a modern creation. They may well become superfluous at some point in time. If and when that becomes the case, statist cosmopolitanism will have exhausted its potential. A different conceptual apparatus will be needed to capture our new concerns.

My argument that state-based associative relations are essential elements to construct a fundamentally appropriate account of agency in the global sphere relies
on the importance of two features: popular sovereignty and civic education. The former is what ensures the enforceability of certain principles; the latter is what secures their long-term endorsement. Miller suggests that there might be a tension here: either we rely on cosmopolitan avant-gardes as morally motivated agents to initiate certain required changes or there must be some more realistic account that places emphasis on a range of institutional mechanisms through which a desired change could be achieved. But I don’t see why these two aspects are necessarily in tension with each other. The concept of a cosmopolitan avant-garde is invoked in my book to indicate (in a non-exclusive way) all those agents (social movements, political parties, civic organisations, individual politicians) who act in the public sphere with the intention of modifying the way institutions respond to the concerns and commitments of those whom they affect (citizens and non-citizens alike). But I do not define the cosmopolitan avant-garde as agents who only engage in direct action outside the usual channels in which domestic politics operates; it would be arbitrary to set such criteria without concern for the different empirical contexts in which specific agents operate. Similarly, although I take Miller’s point that attempts to promote a kind of civic education that develops sensitivity to both international and national issues are in many ways fraught with difficulties, if the defence of cosmopolitan principles that I have offered in the earlier part of this book is compelling, such difficulties should not prevent us from trying to enact the kind of learning processes that will, in the long run, serve to develop a cosmopolitan ethos.

To go back to where I started, if we are to avoid that ‘cold despair’ which confesses that ‘things are bad or at best indifferent, but that nothing better can be expected here’, we need to do more than simply watch the owl of Minerva spread its wings at dusk. We might also need to tell her where to go by identifying appropriate principles orienting moral and political reform.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I tried to answer some critiques of my book ‘Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency’ focusing both on the issues of methodology that take up the first part and on the particular account of global justice that I defend in its second and third parts. I began by addressing two sceptic challenges to the dialectical account of the relation between principles and agency, I continued by clarifying the idea of functional refinement underlying my evolutionary understanding of the nature of norms and I explained the relevance of the notion of avant-garde political agency with regard to both. I then examined more specifically critiques to the defence of global egalitarianism and the relevance of state-based associative relations in my specific contribution to the global justice debate. Although I am certain that I have not solved all the problems, I am very grateful to my critics. They have helped me turn an otherwise solitary process of learning from trial, failure, and success into an enjoyable collective enterprise.
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NOTES

1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1821] 1991), 23.
2. Ibid., 23.
3. Ibid., 20.
4. Ibid., 22–23.
5. Ibid., 22.
6. Ibid., 44.
7. See David Miller, ‘Lea Ypi on Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency: Some Reflections’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6, no. 2 (2013), doi: 10.3402/egp.v6i2.21315.
8. Two very similar challenges are considered by Dworkin, who labels them ‘external’ and ‘internal’ scepticism, in his *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 78–85.
9. See David Owen, ‘Activist Political Theory and the Question of Power’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6, no. 2 (2013), doi: 10.3402/egp.v6i2.21316.
10. See Pablo Gilabert, ‘How Should We Think About the Relation Between Principles and Agency?’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6, no. 2 (2013), doi: 10.3402/egp.v6i2.21314.
11. See David Miller, ‘Lea Ypi on Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency: Some Reflections’, *Ethics & Global Politics*. Others call this an interpretive, or hermeneutic circle, for an influential discussion of the problem in the social sciences, see Charles Taylor, Interpretation and the Sciences of Man in Michael Martin and Lee C. McIntyre, *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 181–212.
12. See the remarks along similar lines in Jürgen Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, in Robert Brandom, Rorty and His Critics (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 37–55.
13. See David Miller, ‘Lea Ypi on Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency: Some Reflections’, *Ethics & Global Politics*.
14. Hydrogen atoms’, Miller says, ‘are what they are and their behaviour isn’t affected by what we say about them’. But if you are a nineteenth-century phenomenological chemist who thinks that the only legitimate object of enquiry in chemistry is the relation between chemical reagents (for example, how particular acids and bases react to form a particular salt), the question of how hydrogen atoms combine to form molecules would not be at all conceivable to you, because entities of the size of atoms do not even count as legitimate objects of enquiry. For further discussion of this point and the example above see Larry Laudan, *Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1977).
15. Both David Miller and David Owen raise this question in their essays.
16. For other defences of the possibility of moral progress to which I am sympathetic see Michele M. Moody-Adams, ‘The Idea of Moral Progress’, *Metaphilosophy* 30, no. 3 (1999): 168–85; and Amanda Roth, ‘Ethical Progress as Problem-Resolving’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012): 384–406.

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17. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Chap 4 in *Wilhelm Meister* (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, [1796] 2011), 8.

18. Indeed these findings are not limited to humans; research in primatology shows that sympathy, altruism, and the capacity for sharing resources extend to higher order apes who can also develop sophisticated forms of communication and tool use with group-specific differences, and that they are able to transfer such knowledge from one generation to the next. These findings in socio-biology challenge common-sense assumptions about the conflictual and inherently aggressive nature of the animal world. But they are also instructive for thinking about the evolutionary nature of moral norms and the role of communication and language in contributing to that development. See for some instructive case studies Frans De Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 210–11 and more generally the discussions in Frans De Waal, Stephen Macedo, and Josiah Ober, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

19. For a splendid analysis of the way in which our current ethical project could be seen as a further development of socialisation processes and attempts to remedy altruism failures that already occupied our hominid ancestors, see Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17–173. Kitcher’s work, which I unfortunately discovered only after my own book was published, offers a pragmatic–naturalist account of the emergence of moral norms and is very much compatible, both from a meta-ethical and from a normative perspective, with my own understanding of dialectic as a method that sees the refinement of normative principles as a result of trial, failure, and success.

20. For a pioneering analysis of function statements see Larry Wright, ‘Functions’, *Philosophical Review* 82, no. 2 (1973): 139–68.

21. For more discussion of functions in the philosophy of biology see Philip Kitcher, ‘Function and Design’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (1993): 379–97.

22. For an attempt to extend functional explanations to social and political institutions see G. A. Cohen. Chap. 9 in *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); for an account that extends the analysis of functions to ethical practices see Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*.

23. For a further development of this thought see Kitcher, ibid., chap. 6.

24. See for a similar account of the role of justice, David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1739] 1985) at book 3; and John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 109–12. I am not saying this is the right function of justice; I am simply bringing this as an example of how we might think functionally about certain values and their relation to political institutions.

25. This is the question Pablo Gilabert raises in his contribution to this symposium.

26. Philip Kitcher raises some interesting questions on how exactly reflective equilibrium works in cases of revolutionary change where the refinement of ethical codes happens not through linear improvements but through fundamental ruptures, sometimes unclear to the very agents who carry out such transformations. This is a question too complex to discuss here but for Kitcher’s account see *The Ethical Project* 334–8.

27. See William James, ‘Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth’, in *Truth: Engagements across Philosophical Traditions*, eds. Jose Medina and David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 26–39.

28. The question of how to think about these constraints is familiar in the contractarian literature on reasonability that Gilabert helpfully mentions in his contribution to this symposium.

29. Miller raises this objection in his review of my symposium. For a critical response to it see also Moody-Adams, ‘The Idea of Moral Progress’, 168–9.

30. David Owen’s symposium also raises this question.
31. This objection is present in many of the contributions to this symposium, in particular those of David Owen, David Miller and Pablo Gilabert.

32. I am grateful to a member of the audience at Queen’s University, Kingston for labelling this objection, which is raised, in different ways in the essays by Owen, Miller and Gilabert. And I am indebted to Kitcher’s book for helping me frame my answer to this objection.

33. Notice that to say that such agents are excluded from normative attention is not the same as saying they should be politically excluded from the public sphere: that claim requires more argument to be made and I do not have space to cover it here.

34. See Rahul Rao, ‘Listening to the Avant-Garde’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6, no. 2 (2013), doi: 10.3402/egp.v6i2.21317.

35. See David Owen, ‘Activist Political Theory and the Question of Power’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6, no. 2 (2013), doi: 10.3402/egp.v6i2.21316.

36. In this book I have emphasised that my methodological and substantive contribution can be assessed independently from each other: the audience for the first is certainly wider and I would welcome attempts to apply the dialectical method to other normative controversies.

37. See for an excellent historical reconstruction of Fichte’s argument, Isaac Nakhimovsky, *The Closed Commercial State: Perpetual Peace and Commercial Society from Rousseau to Fichte* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

38. Karl Marx, ‘The Communist Manifesto’ in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 248–9.

39. Ibid., 249.

40. This is a point I have developed in much greater detail in Lea Ypi, ‘Cosmopolitanism Without If and Without But’, in *Cosmopolitanism versus Non-Cosmopolitanism: Critiques, Defenses, Reconceptualizations*, ed. Gillian Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79–91.