



Philosophical Review

Ethics and Society: A Marxist Interpretation of Value. by Milton Fisk

Review by: Seyla Benhabib

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 92, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), pp. 246-249

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2184930>

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it. The charge that restraint and coercion are special because they are intentional harms, or because they impose one agent's will on another, are quickly disposed of with standard counterexamples showing that the refusal to aid or enable can be every bit as malicious, intentional and devastating as direct interference, and that such refusals also impose one agent's will on another. The charge that restraint and coercion are special because they are uniquely violative of human rights is also rejected, but here Crocker's argument is much more shaky. His strategy is to establish (mainly by appeals to intuition) that there are positive human duties (e.g., to give aid), and that the consequent positive rights may legitimately be enforced. As this human rights charge is an utterly crucial line of attack against Crocker's whole project, it deserves much more careful attention than is possible in the eight pages devoted to it (p. 101–109).

11) The remaining chapters consider the value of liberty (Chapter VII) and its costs and limits (Chapter VIII). The former is the most superficial in the book, and the latter (though this may be due merely to my limitations) was by far the least interesting. For my purposes, they could have been omitted without in any way damaging what is otherwise a lucid and illuminating volume.

The book has no index.

LAWRENCE C. BECKER

Hollins College

The Philosophical Review, XCII, No. 2 (April 1983)

ETHICS AND SOCIETY: A MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF VALUE. By MILTON FISK. New York and London, New York University Press, 1980. Pp. xx, 272.

The recent resurgence of interest among Marxist thinkers in moral and political philosophy has a twofold reason: first, the realities of existing socialism along with the inability of orthodox Marxist theory to offer an emancipatory alternative for late capitalist societies have led thinkers like Kolakowski, Heller, Habermas and Castoriadis to reexamine, and in Kolakowski's case, to reject Marxist-Leninist assumptions about class-struggle, the violent seizure of state-power and democratic-centralist organizational strategies. Second, Habermas in particular claims that historical materialism as formulated by Marx in the *German Ideology* and in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is inadequate to explain both the genesis and the development of "normative structures"—a term referring

to religions, world-views, legal and political belief-systems and moral conceptions.¹

Milton Fisk, although raising the timely issues of a Marxian ethics and theory of value, is untouched by these developments. He takes for granted the validity of historical materialism as a theory of social formations and normative structures, while restating the cogency of a Trotskyite strategy of class-struggle, political democracy and the state. In the first part of *Marxism and Ethics*, Fisk outlines the standpoint of ethical relativism; this is juxtaposed to ethical absolutism in the second half. Part Three is an analysis of the social concept of the person; the remaining two sections of the book provide an account of the conditions of human action and a prospectus for a theory of rights.

Fisk claims that a Marxian theory of ethics is "class relativistic" (xvi). The ethics valid for one class or group need not be valid for some other class or group and "the right thing to do is determined by a consideration of what ultimately, in view of the primacy of class, advances the realization of the tendencies of one's class" (xvi). A class-relativistic ethics is a form of ethical naturalism. Ethical naturalism has as its first postulate that ethical life and all that on which it depends is totally encompassed within the universe of people, their groups and the material things they use. The second postulate of ethical naturalism states that human nature is the ultimate basis for the origin, authority and validity of ethical principles (21). Since most modern ethical theories like utilitarianism, contractarianism and emotivism would also satisfy these conditions, to distinguish class-relativistic Marxian ethics from other variants Fisk develops the "social concept of the person." According to this conception, a universal human nature does not exist; the idea "human-kind is a weak, not a strong, kind" (101). This weak theory is only compatible with postulating that neutral basic needs, also called "survival needs" (93)—the needs for food, sex, support (cooperation) and deliberation—are constant features of human nature. Survival needs are always socially patterned. Both the structure of needs felt and modes of satisfying them are social activities, arising out of human life in groups.

On this basis, Fisk criticizes utilitarianism for taking the structure of needs and desires to be ahistorical givens; contractarianism, on the other hand, cannot provide an alternative to relativism "since the absolute conception of human nature it rests upon must be empty" (73). Class-relativistic ethics is not deontological, since it does not postulate the priority of the right to the

¹J. Habermas, "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, T. M. McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

good. The rightness of principles is relative to social structures. Teleologists in turn are wrong in not viewing the "limits imposed on what is good by social structures" (84).

Fisk's discussion of the social concept of the person, his analysis of alienation in light of the distinction between "imposed" vs. "internal" needs contains much that is interesting, but is ultimately unconvincing. For, if from a Marxian standpoint even survival needs are socially structured, how can one distinguish between "imposed," "false" and "internal," "true" needs without appealing to some concept of human essence that transcends the merely historically given structures of needs? Fisk does not solve this problem, but dissolves it with the simple assertion that only those needs compatible with "true class interests" are the authentic ones.

"True class interests" is the only normative standard to which Fisk appeals to determine the right as well as the good. An action is good relative to a given group provided it is one that in some ways advances the interests of that group; while a person has a right relative to one group to perform an action "when putting obstacles in the way of that person's doing that action would set back the interests characteristic of that group" (34). Thus, whether or not conscientious objection is a civil right is to be determined by "estimating empirically the prospects for one's class" (127). On the question of the right to free speech Fisk reasons alike (208ff). Now if all ethics is class-relative why should the "interests of the working class" be a criterion on the basis of which to decide matters of goodness and rightness? For each person only the interests of the class to which he or she belongs is the relevant moral standpoint. But if we cannot argue why the interests of one class should be given moral and political preference over the interests of another, then either simple choice, the power struggle (might is right), or both, determine the right and the good. Class-relativistic ethics sounds like ethical nihilism and political opportunism.

Fisk has disregarded a central claim that saves Marx, if not his followers, from ethical nihilism. Since his early *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Marx claimed that the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and the emancipation of the working class would mean universal human emancipation.² Whether Marx was right cannot be settled here. I rather think he was wrong in attributing to the working-class a messianic function to end not only its own suffering and exploitation but all other forms of human domination and injustice as well. The point is whether Fisk can defend a class-relativistic ethics that is more than ethical nihilism without some such appeal to universal human emancipation or without

²Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. with an introd. by Joseph O'Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 142.

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arguing why the class antagonism of present society is one which is in the interest of humans to abolish. Fisk assumes that the "class interests" is a knowable, definable metaphysical entity to which we can appeal to curtail human rights and evaluate human virtue. In the history of 20th century Marxism-Leninism this concept served one metaphysician of the proletariat after another as a justification to consolidate power, often against the class in whose interest power had presumably been seized. It is disappointing that Milton Fisk does not see the task of Marxian theory of ethics in developing an anti-authoritarian, democratic and emancipatory Marxian morals and politics, but justifies a position whose disastrous moral and political implications we today cannot honestly ignore.

SEYLA BENHABIB

Boston University

The Philosophical Review, XCII, No. 2 (April 1983)

POLITICAL CONCEPTS: A RECONSTRUCTION. By FELIX E. OPPENHEIM.
The University of Chicago Press, 1981. Pp. 227.

The project driving *Political Concepts* is threefold: 1) to present and defend explications of four major political concepts, 2) to show that these concepts are devoid of normative content, and 3) to vindicate reconstructionism's critical approach to conceptual analysis against ordinary language philosophy's subservience to everyday usage. Oppenheim should find few opponents in regard to the last contention, and his formal accounts of power, social freedom, egalitarianism, and public interest, though bound to attract some serious and much caviling criticism, are for the most part plausible. The controversy sparked by this book will undoubtedly center on Oppenheim's insistence that political scientists can and should understand these concepts as normatively neutral.

The thesis that the concepts of power, social freedom, egalitarianism, and public interest are normatively charged could mean that these concepts can only be invoked to characterize desiderata or animadversions. On this view, to predicate these concepts of policies or states of affairs is to commend or deplore them. But Oppenheim correctly observes that power can be rightful or illicit, that social freedom can be too extensive or insufficiently permissive, and that egalitarianism and the public interest can be mismanaged, as well. Still, since no one would deny that information about the distribution of power and freedom, the forms of egalitarianism in