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BOOK REVIEWS

97

WILLIAM LEON MCBRIDE, *Social Theory at a Crossroads*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press (distributed in the U.S. by Humanities Press), 1980, 171 pp.

This book is a revised version of lectures presented at Duquesne University in 1977. Its stated purpose is to introduce intellectually sophisticated but not universally well-informed students to social and political thought and to present an original theoretical work, perhaps a synthesis or prolegomena to a synthesis of worthwhile contemporary currents of the Anglo-American and Continental traditions.

Like Sartre, McBride maintains that we should combine "a Marxian approach to socioeconomic structures with a Freudian and existential attention to the individual as the source of free choice and hence, as the creator of the life world of meanings and values and structures . . ." (55). Methodologically, there is a still sharper focus. For, while the principle task of social theory is to explain and propose a resolution to cultural crisis, the primary function of philosophy, according to McBride, is to provide a phenomenological critique. "The discipline of philosophy," he writes, "is unique among academic disciplines in its commitment to the radical questioning of all presuppositions. It alone has no *raison d'être* apart from such an enterprise, no separate body of knowledge that it needs to preserve" (141).

Chapter I contains a critical survey of theories which have developed in the major Western countries over the last thirty years, primarily since the end of World War II. As a survey it covers diverse writers such as Karl-Otto Apel, Hannah Arendt, Richard Bernstein, James Burnham, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, John Dewey, Margaret Macdonald, Jean-Paul Sartre, Leo Strauss, Michael Walzer, Max Weber, and T.D. Weldon—to name just a few. As a critique, it rejects almost out-of-hand theories which aim at being, or are purely, descriptive as well as those which are grounded upon classical versions of realism. Chapter II, probably the best in the book, describes the assets and liabilities of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Chapter III is devoted to an analysis of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, and Ronald Dworkin's *Taking Rights Seriously*. It also extols the need for obtaining a synthesis between these developments and mainstream Continental European philosophy. After an examination of Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, Chapter IV proceeds to explain how social and political philosophy can and should be employed. The claim is that a Marxian approach enables us to understand not only why some political groups sacrifice human needs and values to the alleged needs of the dominant economic system—and, therefore, why certain types of human activities wax and others wane—but also what direction ought to be taken by way of remedy.

Two difficulties should be noted. First: Philosophers who say they are committed to the radical questioning of all presuppositions seldom see fit to question their own. McBride assumes, without benefit of argument and with an air of intellectual self-righteousness, that his own Marxian approach not only is the best way of coming to understand social-political phenomena but also provides the direction, presumably the best direction Western society ought to take. Not only is the former claim dubious but, given McBride's silence about what positive direction ought to be taken, the latter seems limp, if not empty. Second: If the principle task of social theory is to explain and propose a resolution to cultural crisis, if the primary function of philosophy is to provide a phenomenological critique, and if that critique (largely because of its original license) leaves behind an intellectual wasteland, then social theory has been reduced to philosophy, and philosophy in turn has been reduced to a form of normative nihilism.

When I observe a philosopher indulging in the task of defining philosophy, I invariably think that this is his compensation for doing philosophy in the particular way he is going to define it. I am not going to pursue this thought any further, but I think it would be easy to show that philosophers do philosophy in a variety of ways. What is perhaps a knottier, but more fruitful, issue is the question, what is the best way of combining philosophy and politics?

Many non-Marxists would agree that philosophy should neither become dominated by the quixotic pursuit of the best state of things conceivable, nor be reduced to a combination of scientific method and cultural anthropology, nor merely express the values of the dominant economic class.

But it does not follow from this that all we have left is critique. Of course, one may be tempted to argue that, since man strives more toward avoiding pain than seeking or pursuing the higher goods, the fundamental function of philosophy should be upon helping avoid the pain which is largely caused by the misuse of power and economic exploitation. This argument gains strength if we add that, since many more clearly understand how to eliminate the bad rather than how to achieve higher goods, and since most human beings are poor and needy, the primary function of non-elitist philosophy ought to be that of critique, a critique of bad living conditions and causally related apologetic philosophies of life. Yet, with all this said, does not practical wisdom also require having positive as well as negative ends? And does not a fuller understanding of history demand that it be viewed not merely as being pushed by powerful economic forces but also as being often pulled by the vision of a positively better world?

Philosophy can be both negative and positive. It can describe or prescribe what state of affairs ought to be removed and what ought to be brought into being. It can describe a society where vital needs are routinely met and where the ability to meet these needs is protected by law. Nonetheless, since there is both a plurality and a hierarchy of basic human needs, it can also describe the structure and preferable distribution of higher goods, goods which have their root in genetic predispositions, such as social, self-respect, and self-actualization needs. To rank ideals, to actually decide which of the desirable needs or ends should take priority, is the task of a given society or mankind in general. But to critically evaluate this hierarchy and conceive of the theory that best helps achieve and protect them is the major business of ethical-political philosophy. Now not all philosophy is marked by an invincible faith in the rehabilitation of more ideal world, and not all philosophers have the vision and courage to choose and clearly describe the direction we ought to take. But the best in philosophy is, I believe, so marked.

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