

Essays in Philosophy

ISSN 1526-0569 | Essays in Philosophy is published by the Pacific University Libraries

Volume 19, Issue 1 (2018)

Book Review Materialist Ethics and Life-Value

Colin M. Patrick
Portland State University

Materialist Ethics and Life-Value

Noonan, Jeff, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 238 pp., incl., CA\$34.95
ISBN 9780773539655

Erratum: Fixed layout error 6/8/18

Essays Philos (2018)19:1 | DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1602

Correspondence: patrickc@pdx.edu



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Jeff Noonan's *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value* is a deeply engaging and provocative defense of materialism in ethics—although a materialism that draws less on the familiar figures of Hobbes and Hume, and more on figures like Karl Marx and Baron D'Holbach, the 18th century enlightenment ethicist who focused on human interdependency and its ethical implications. First, he defends a naturalist realism in ethics that is grounded in human beings' basic dependence on one another and the natural world, and second, the claim that the global capitalist economic system is disruptive and subversive of such relations of dependence, and thus unethical.

Materialism has historically gotten a bad rap in ethical philosophy, from the denigration of the “merely” animal aspects of our nature going back to Plato and given especially pointed expression in Kant, to the dismissal of utilitarianism as based on the maximization of pleasure and therefore a morality “worthy only of swine”—as J.S. Mill memorably put it in defending the theory from this charge—to G.E. Moore's attack on the “naturalistic fallacy” of defining the term “good” by reference to any natural property. Moore's idea that there is an unbridgeable gap between *any* identifiable bit of material reality, on the one hand, and any normative claim about what is good and bad or what should or should not be done, on the other, has become a nearly unquestioned orthodoxy among 20th and 21st century ethicists.

Adding to the apparent lack of any fit between ethics and materialism is the fact that many materialists espouse a *reductionistic* version of it. There are two common forms of this, and neither one is very hospitable to ethical philosophy. On the one hand, many materialists conceptualize reality as excluding everything that cannot be expressed in the language of physics and inorganic chemistry, leaving no room for ethics of any description—since ethics surely must include things like self-conscious agents, reasons and justifications, intentions, and some way of evaluating actions and results as good and bad, all of which go missing in any such reduction. On the other hand, those with a wider conception of material reality make room for ethical dispositions and values, but limit them to basic evolutionary adaptation strategies (a recent example of this is William Casebeer's 2003 book *Natural Ethical Facts*). In other words, the most common forms of materialism within philosophy either erase the possibility of ethics altogether, or else shoe-horn all of it into the narrow limits of survival and reproductive advantage.

At the same time, however, there is something to be said in favor of materialism in its broadest, and oldest, conception, according to which the material world is the *basis* of everything that develops in it, including us—shaping and circumscribing what we are, what we can do, and what we cannot do without. So, for example, such materialists believe that thought and ideas have a material basis—and thus that there can be no disembodied minds or thoughts—but this does not have to entail that thought is “nothing

more” than brain activity. Propositional thoughts, for example, have conceptual and logical relations to other such thoughts (such as implication) that cannot be captured without distortion, if at all, in the language of physics or biochemistry. One can agree with this and consistently maintain that without the physical and biochemical world, the capacity for thought would never have evolved, nor would thoughts currently exist, and *a fortiori* there would be no logical relation between and among them. That is, one can hold that the material world is the foundation of everything, including phenomena that *emerge* from the material level even though they cannot be conceptually *reduced* to it. (This is sometimes called “emergentism,” and Noonan provides a detailed discussion of it, drawing extensively on biological research as well as metaphysical theory, in Chapter 1.)

In short, this broader conception of materialism is one in which physical matter has a metaphysical priority over mind, even if the latter has unique and irreducible qualities—which entails among other things a rejection of immaterial souls and deities, the hope of an afterlife, and even certain secular ethical conceptions such as Kant’s pure practical reason, which as Kant sees it can but need not be embodied in flesh and blood creatures like us. (Not only the hope of an afterlife, but the *rejection* of this hope, can have ethical consequences: the materialist metaphysics of Epicurus, for example, had the point of freeing people from the fear of death, and the possible torment their souls would suffer after it.)

On this conception, the material world, as described and explained by material science, may not be all there is to reality, but it nevertheless “has its own dynamics which human beings ignore at their peril,” according to Noonan. That is, human beings and their capacities of thought and action are a product of, and entirely dependent on, material reality and not the other way around. (This does not exclude the possibility that human thought can *shape or change* material reality—provided, of course, that the thought in question is located in, and acted upon by, living human beings.)

What are some of the ethical implications of this broader materialism? “No matter how high and wide human speculation might soar,” Noonan writes, “we remain...tied to the life-sustaining and life-enabling (but also life-damaging and life-destroying) powers of nature” (17-18). For starters, we are materially dependent on air and water, which we cannot simply conjure out of nothing or satisfy in the realm of mere thought. But of course we need not only the surrounding natural world but also other human beings and the work they do in order to survive. We are not only *naturally dependent* but also *socially interdependent* in a way that is intimately intertwined with this natural dependency. Even the most self-sufficient foragers rely on the accumulated knowledge of edible plants and their common habitats that is developed and communicated to them by others, on shared techniques of finding, gathering, and producing food, and so forth. And of course

in modern society no individual human being can so much as draw breath for more than a day or two into the future without relying on a massive amount of work done by countless other people: growing, harvesting, and transporting food and other basic necessities; maintaining power grids and sanitation systems; producing textiles; mining raw materials; building and maintaining housing; doing all the work that is a necessary precondition of (or a preparatory stage in) all *those* things; and so on. These are not merely ideas, opinions, or claims, but plain facts about the material preconditions of our day to day existence.

I agree with Noonan that this (non-reductionistic) form of materialism is not only very well rooted in reality, but has “ethically relevant” aspects as well—and is, for these reasons, a very promising direction in which to push normative ethics. Just as we ignore the properties of fire or large bodies of water “at our [physical] peril,” so too do we develop a false and entitled sense of our own self-sufficiency, and take all that sustains us for granted at our *ethical* peril—both individually and collectively.

Anthony Weston, for example, dedicates a chapter of his introductory ethics textbook *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* to what he refers to as the “Ethics of Relationship,” grounded in relations of material dependence and interdependence, which he sees as giving rise to an ethic of mindfulness, gratefulness, and a willingness to pull one’s weight in the maintenance and development of the things that sustain us, from social bonds of trust to the natural environment. (The primary texts he includes in this chapter are the care ethics of Nel Noddings, the communitarian ethics of Kwasi Wiredu, and the environmental ethics of Aldo Leopold.)

Similarly, Noonan focuses on what he calls the “life-ground” of ethical “value” (sometimes just “life-value”), defined by John McMurtry—whose work Noonan draws on and develops extensively in this book—as “the connection of life to life’s requirements as a felt bond of being” (8). That is, life-value is not simply the *fact* of our dependency and interdependency, nor even the theoretical *awareness* of this fact, but a kind of mindful, appreciative understanding of this fact reflected in practice: comporting ourselves toward the social and natural world as though we vitally depend on them, which in fact we do.

In the first part of the book, Noonan develops the non-reductionistic form of materialism sketched above (one that issues in a conception of the “irreducibly organic-social nature of human beings”), and articulates the “range of [specific] human life-requirements” this entails, carefully distinguishing them from *consumer demands*—which sometimes are, but sometimes are not, tied to actual, objective life-requirements. In Chapter 2 Noonan focuses on three dimensions of human nature he takes to be universal. First, he discusses the “physical-organic requirements of life,” such as air, water, food, shelter. Second, he elaborates on the conditions of self-conscious and so-

cially engaged agency, which requires “the satisfaction of definite socio-cultural requirements of human life” such as access to knowledge and education, freedom of speech, investigation, and association, opportunities for fulfilling work, and the “general social conditions required to develop the individual capacity to identify with and care about others”—as opposed to encountering them as competitors or potential rivals for access to means of subsistence or other life-requirements. And third, he emphasizes the requirement that people be afforded sufficient free time to develop any capacities or interests, beyond staying alive, that they can hope to call their own.

In Part Two, Noonan builds on the foregoing in mounting a critique of the current “ruling value system” implicit in global capitalism—a system that he argues runs contrary to, and is systematically destructive of, life-value and the above trio of requirements for the vast majority of people. (In other words, capitalism embodies “conflicts between the reproductive requirements” of its own subsistence—sometimes referred to as “system-requirements,” i.e. what *it* needs in order to survive—on the one hand, and, on the other, “the life-requirements of human beings.”)

In chapter three he begins by developing an account of the way in which such system-requirements arise and come into conflict with life-requirements that draws extensively on Marx’s discussion in *The German Ideology* of the way in which societies come to produce a surplus over their immediate needs; the way in which a ruling class then emerges and institutionalizes the appropriation of this surplus for their own benefit, establishing stark inequalities of wealth and power; and the way in which the ruling class, and thus also the society it superintends, maintains itself in part by the dissemination of ideology that is meant primarily to reconcile everyone—especially those on the shorter end of this inequality—to the system and *its* requirements by framing the system as natural, inevitable, or at least the best among real alternatives. Chapter 4 then examines the “life-blind logic of social expansion” as it has played out specifically in the cases of British colonialism and US involvement in the Middle East. In Chapter 5 Noonan discusses the ways in which capitalism commodifies and “instrumentalizes” life-value in deleterious ways.

In Part Three (which includes Chapter 6 and the Conclusion), Noonan draws on these arguments to build, in a somewhat neo-Aristotelian way, a conception of human good and the good life for human beings that goes beyond the narrow limits of mere survival and reproduction entailed by the more reductionistic version of materialism that informs most work in evolutionary ethics. His argument here, as he puts it, is that “if freedom means nothing more than doing what one wants to do, without regard to the natural conditions of life or the life-requirements of other people, it undermines rather than coheres with the life-ground of value, and thus tends toward

material irrationality” (184-5)—that is, decisions and actions that in some way undercut the life-requirements on which everyone, including the agent so acting, depends.

This book is a deeply engaging and provocative challenge to the received wisdom of professional ethical philosophy, characterized as it often is, on the one hand, by a general aversion to materialism—to the very idea of naturalistic arguments that derive normative ethical claims from facts about human (and/or other) life—and by an equally pervasive individualism in its conception of ethical agency and obligation, as well as its conception of the *foundations* of these things in the sentience, rationality, character, and/or prospective good life of individuals.

One of its real strengths is in the rigor with which it responds to common objections to materialism and naturalism. Noonan concisely and compellingly rebuts the reductionistic conceptions of materialism that are often assumed to be the only kinds there are (the articulation of a richer form of materialism in the first chapter is arguably worth the price of the book by itself)—such as Daniel Dennett’s ostensibly materialist argument in *Freedom Evolves* against free choice. Likewise, Noonan responds to a number of the most common objections to materialism, from Friedrich von Hayek’s argument to Friedrich von Hayek’s argument that articulating basic needs or interests common to all people is a kind of paternalistic invasion into agents’ right to have opposed views about what they need (as Noonan responds on p. 51, “to have a social commitment to the comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements is not to impose alien ends on people; it is to satisfy the fundamental conditions of their positing *any other ends* for themselves to pursue”) to the common worry about potential conflicts between individual and collective well-being. Throughout, Noonan’s well-researched and analytically strong discussion offers to at least move us a stage or two beyond the kinds of criticisms that are assumed by so many philosophers to be sufficient in putting the kind of approach to ethical philosophy he’s advancing here out of bounds.

I also think it is productive and worthwhile to bring Marx and Marxism into conversation with philosophical ethics. Noonan is not the first to do so—notable examples are George Brenkert’s *Marx’s Ethics of Freedom*, Steven Lukes’s *Marxism and Morality*, Cornel West’s *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, Paul Blackledge’s *Marxism and Ethics*, and Alan Gilbert’s essay “Historical Theory and the Structure of Moral Argument in Marx”—the last of which Noonan discusses in the Introduction. Noonan’s contribution is to use Marx as a point of departure for a more general rapprochement between non-reductionist, emergentist materialism (of which Marx is only one example, albeit a central one) and the kind of ethical naturalism which—going back to Aristotle—seeks to make sense of normative claims about the good and bad in human action in terms of

the nature of human life and the conditions under which it is lived: what our distinctive capacities, basic needs, vulnerabilities, and potentialities actually, materially are. Noonan demonstrates that a serious look at our nature is not something that leaves us with a bunch of disconnected, ethically irrelevant facts that people may or may not care about without it making much of a difference to themselves or others, but in large measure indicates the kinds of things *it makes rational sense to care about* given the kind of creatures we are. More specifically, it reveals that we are not merely the self-sufficient, atomistic, self-interested consumers that capitalism has a way of insidiously encouraging us to think we are.

At the same time, the book is not without problems, and I want to end by discussing one that I think is troubling for Noonan's overall project, although I am sympathetic to it. Noonan seeks, and sees his version of materialist ethics as providing, the kind of *universalism* often thought to be an essential ingredient to any ethical theory: there are, he points out, "life-interests," grounded in life-requirements, that are "common to all human beings" (46). If this is true, then it may seem necessary to break, as Noonan does, with those parts of Marxist analysis centered around the concept of economic class—since no one of them comprises *all* human beings.

For example, he writes: "the contradiction [between capitalism's system-requirements and human life-requirements] is deeper and more universal than that between [capitalist] ruling class and working class interests...the life-grounded materialist standpoint is not identical to the standpoint of the proletariat. Rather, it is the standpoint in which the standpoint of the proletariat must be grounded if it is to be a force that successfully resolves the contradiction" (98). I have to wonder: does Noonan hold out any hope that the *capitalist* class can "ground itself" in the "life-grounded materialist standpoint" as well? If not, what conclusion should be drawn from this? The "proletariat," he argues, can only resolve the contradiction between capitalism's system-requirements and human needs by adopting "the life-grounded materialist standpoint"—but should we take this to mean that *only* they can plausibly do so? And if so, won't "life-grounded ethics," far from *departing* a class analysis, with all its thorny questions, as Noonan seems eager to do, instead put us right at the center of it? What happens if, as Marxists believe, the organized working class is the only force materially capable (not *guaranteed to*, but *capable*) of building a world around genuine cooperation, coordination, sharing, solidarity, equality, or a world in which access to education and culture are broadened and democratized—such that everyone, not just the most fortunate or wealthy, has a chance to live at a reasonable level of comfort and develop *as* a unique individual? That is, what if only this particular socio-economic class is able to actually fulfill and develop the very life-grounded ethics being articulated here?

In a few places Noonan points out that life-grounded ethics goes beyond, or at least is not equivalent to, the narrow interests of workers—which presumably are limited to things like better wages and working conditions. But he doesn't seem to consider that these narrower interests are the interests workers have, specifically, *under capitalism* and would thus likely change, along with the class itself, if it had the opportunity to transform society in its own image, or reorder things around collective ownership and democratic control of the economy, in which *everyone* would participate and from which all would benefit.

And to return to the first question, what happens if it turns out that the capitalist class and its economic and political representatives are unable to even *claim* any of the above as a goal in more than a partial, inconsistent, or insincere way, never mind achieve any of it in practice even if they wanted to? What if, in short, human (and ecological) liberation—and the corresponding ethical vision Noonan espouses—can only be materially achieved, not by having everyone come together to debate and discuss life-requirements and life-value *across* economic class, but by working people organizing and undertaking a *displacement* of the capitalist class from its position of economic and political power, and building a new society altogether?

It should be remembered that Marx saw his analysis of human society in terms of economic classes not as an add-on to a more basic materialist analysis, but as an integral part of the latter: for him, human society is not simply an agglomeration of human beings collectively producing life's necessities as an undifferentiated whole, but—at a basic, material level—*divides* into those doing the actual productive work, on the one hand, and those whose ownership of the means of production (land, sources of raw materials, factories...and in the case of slave societies, human beings themselves) provides them with the sole means of directing, setting the terms and conditions for, and thus reaping the surplus from that work.

This is especially important to keep in mind given Noonan's claim that "socially pervasive forms of life-blind activity"—for example capitalism's constant drive to expand in the interest of profits, blind to basic human needs—"are able to reproduce themselves because *all* classes have come to accept the prescriptions of the value system as a 'necessity to which there is no alternative.'" (97-9) This may be true, but it is one thing to point to a general consensus, *across* class lines, that the current system is at least worth preserving, and quite another to diagnose how this consensus has been achieved, which class is served by it, and which has an interest in challenging it.

Materialism is at bottom about starting from the actual world as it is actually configured and organized, including socially, and working out solutions to problems based on this, instead of noble ideas that have no material basis or any way of being real-

ized in practice. In other words, materialism is not just a matter of *interpreting* the world, but has clear implications for the manner in which we approach the task of *changing* it. For Marx at least, materialism entails that class-divided societies, including capitalism, are not the product of all people coming together to decide that a given particular economic system, with its “system-requirements” and ideology, is the way to go. Nor are they maintained ideologically by *everyone* so much they are—as Noonan himself acknowledges—maintained by the various organs of opinion-shaping means (such as the mass media) at the disposal of the ruling class. Even if the outcome is that we all seem to be more or less reconciled to capitalism, this general consensus is not spontaneous but manufactured by a particular class with a particular interest in maintaining both the consensus *and* the social structure being consented to.

But if this is true, then there is reason for a Marxist to be skeptical—to say the least—of the practical conclusion Noonan reaches at the end of the book: that the ills of the current system are to be cured by “creating institutional space” in which the marginalized and excluded can—presumably alongside everyone else within a single institutional space—“speak and participate” (217). For a Marxist, it is not only idealism, but idealism of an entirely utopian kind (exactly what Noonan seeks to avoid in this book) to expect the problems of *any* social system that is run by and for the benefit of a ruling class to be solved by having *all* people come together—ruling and ruled alike—and, simply through open debate and discussion, transform it into a more humane system based on life-grounded value.

This is of course not to say that Marx has all the answers, nor that materialist ethics has to conform to every part of *his* materialism in particular (as opposed to that of Epicurus, or Hume, or Hobbes, or Baron D’Holbach, the 18th century materialist Noonan restores to the ethical canon here). But it seems to me that the book would be improved by grappling with these questions, and showing that we can answer them without reverting from materialism back into idealism, especially since the latter is something Noonan is explicitly concerned about avoiding. As is so often the case when drawing from a central or canonical figure in philosophy, it is risky to pick and choose certain elements and ignore others. It’s clear that Noonan wants to steer clear of a class analysis for its divisive political implications and its apparent departure from the kind of universalism he understandably sees as tied to any serious ethics, but it is not clear that he can hold on to materialism in doing so. If he can, contrary to what I’m suggesting here, more argument and explanation could be put forward, perhaps in the second edition.

