The Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen: Back to Socialist Basics. By Nicholas Vrousalis. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. ix + 164. Price….)

Nicholas Vrousalis’s *The Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen: Back to Socialist Basics* is the first ever monograph devoted to explaining, interpreting, and connecting the many theses advanced by G.A. Cohen. Though a considerable amount of work has been written about Cohen’s thought, most of this scholarship has been devoted to examining one or another of his views in isolation, and even where it has drawn connections, it has only done so in the space of an article or book chapter. Vrousalis’s book, which was recently published in paperback, is thus unique with respect to both its length and breadth. Its subject matter spans the entirety of Cohen’s academic career, from his early work on Karl Marx and historical materialism, to his later, multi-faceted engagement with Rawlsian liberalism.

*The Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen* is (primarily) comprised of an introductory chapter and six body chapters. The first three body chapters follow the three main phases of Cohen’s career: Cohen’s work in analytic Marxism, his engagement with libertarian political philosophy, and his subsequent engagement with liberal egalitarianism. The last three body chapters deal with particular topics in Cohen’s work, namely Cohen’s understanding of exploitation, his conception of community, and his commitment to economic planning. The introductory chapter, in addition to outlining the book, serves to identify the major elements of Cohen’s methodology, e.g., his value pluralism and his use of ‘immanent critique’ (pp. 4-5); as well as to discuss Cohen’s work on topics that do not fit neatly into the body chapters.

Vrousalis intends for T*he Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen* to be accessible to anyone who possesses a basic understanding of political philosophy, and I think he accomplishes this, with a few exceptions. The first body chapter will be a tough read for philosophers who possess only a passing familiarity with Marx scholarship and Marxian concepts, and there are a few areas in the book where Vrousalis describes a debate or line of argument rather quickly. Readers already familiar with Cohen’s work will find these quick descriptions easy enough to follow, but I think that newcomers will find it necessary to read over them slowly and perhaps more than once. Generally speaking, though, I found the book to be quite readable.

*The Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen* performs a number of functions that aid our understanding of Cohen’s work. For one, it does an excellent job of highlighting the points of transition between each phase of Cohen’s career and the way in which his work in one phase often seems to have motivated his work in another. For example, Cohen’s critique of Marx’s understanding of exploitation (pp. 49-51 and pp. 84-91), as well as his attack on the Right’s use of ‘negative freedom’ (freedom understood as the absence of interference) to defend private property and libertarian policies (pp. 42-9), are explicitly connected to Cohen’s later work on egalitarianism and distributive justice. If, as Cohen claims, the employment relation between capitalists and workers is only exploitive because situated against an unjust distribution of the means of production, and if, as Cohen also claims, an unequal distribution of private property entails an unequal distribution of negative freedom, then it’s only sensible to make the study of distributive justice a theoretical priority. Connections like this will have already been apparent to some readers, but I nonetheless think it’s helpful that Vrousalis explicitly draws attention to them, especially for readers who are unfamiliar with Cohen’s corpus.

Some of the connections Vrousalis draws are not at all obvious, however, even to those closely familiar with Cohen’s work. They may not have even been obvious to Cohen himself. For example, in the introduction, Vrousalis insightfully notes (albeit without going into much depth) a justificatory relationship between Cohen’s fact-insensitivity thesis and his value pluralism (p. 8). According to the fact-insensitivity thesis, the relationship of support between a factual premise and a principle it justifies presupposes one or more fundamental principles not justified by facts. Pertinent justificatory facts include facts about feasibility and the moral costs of implementation. If Cohen’s right that these facts can’t justify principles without presupposing fact-insensitive principles, then we have reason to believe that the number of justified, fundamental principles is greater than it may at first appear. The fact-insensitivity thesis implies that putative fundamental principles and the values they express (justice, community, efficiency, etc) cannot be undermined by infeasibility or moral costliness, and this makes it harder for those with monistic ambitions to trim the population of fundamental principles down to just one.

Vrousalis does more than just draw our attention to the connections and relationships of support between Cohen’s theses, however. He also draws our attention to some of the tensions. One such tension is between Cohen’s luck egalitarianism, i.e., Cohen’s view that distributive justice condemns involuntary inequalities but requires that inequalities traceable to choice be left intact; and his apparent endorsement of the socialist principle ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ (Vrousalis’s discussion is restricted to the ‘to each according to his need’ part of the socialist principles: see pp. 62-6).’ Cohen explicitly commits himself to luck equality, and some of his writing implies that he accepted a qualified version of the socialist principle (see the version expressed in *Rescuing Justice & Equality*: pp. 208-9), but the requirements of these principles do not mirror each other and may very well come into conflict. Nothing about luck egalitarianism suggests that people with ability are required to productively exercise their abilities, and neediness can be either voluntarily or involuntarily acquired. The socialist principle requires the satisfaction of need, regardless of need’s source, but luck egalitarianism only requires the better off to address involuntary neediness. Neediness traceable to choice should, by contrast, be left intact, from a luck egalitarian perspective.

I don’t know whether all of the tensions Vrousalis highlights are resolvable, and in any event, I lack the space to discuss all of them here. I will note, however, that the above-mentioned tension seems to be resolvable in light of Cohen’s late-career distinction between fundamental principles and rules of regulation. As Vrousalis notes in the introduction, fundamental principles, according to Cohen, are fact-insensitive, and they function to specify the content of particular fundamental values. Regulatory principles, by contrast, are all-things-considered, action-guiding principles that derive their justification from fundamental principles (pp. 6-8). It’s clear that Cohen thought of justice as a fundamental value and of luck equality as a fundamental principle expressive of that value (*Rescuing Justice & Equality*: pp. 300-2). And though he does not, to my knowledge, explicitly categorize the socialist principle, he ought to have thought of it as regulatory. For one, the socialist principles is reflective of values that Cohen affirms: ‘from each according to his ability’ is a productive requirement that reflects the value of efficiency, and the further requirement that what’s produced by ability go ‘to each according to his need’ reflects the importance of caring relationships (the value of community). What’s more, the socialist principle is partially supported by, though it does not completely mirror, luck equality. Whether one is born with certain abilities or talents (or the capacity for them) is a matter of luck rather than choice, so it makes sense, from a luck egalitarian perspective, for the extra resources produced by productive talents to be redistributed. Understood this way, any discrepancy between the socialist principle and luck equality is simply what’s necessary for the former to be a reasonable, all-things-considered regulatory principle, rather than a principle that solely reflects justice.

On the whole, *The Political Philosophy of G.A. Cohen* is a clearly written, insightful contribution to Cohen scholarship that identifies connections and tensions even Cohen’s close readers may have missed. I highly recommend it.

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