

Book Review: Human Rights and the Care of the Self by Alexandre Lefebvre

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Lefebvre, Alexandre, *Human Rights and the Care of the Self*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018. x + 264 pages. Hardcover, \$26.95.

Alexandre Lefebvre, Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, undertakes two primary approaches concerning the necessity of human rights in the modern age; one based on an individual level and the other based in society. Individually, human rights are the primary avenue through which a person cultivates and protects him or herself against and within the public at large. According to Lefebvre, the more each person uses the ideology of human rights to cultivate, and eventually manifest the best version of her or himself, the more support for the rule of law in a democratic society. However, Lefebvre indicates that the surge of western individualism can serve as an obstacle to such development, and is exactly the plague that Alexis de Tocqueville lambasted. In contrast, the author asserts that the pursuit of human rights should serve as a constructive measure which ultimately benefits individuals, or members of vulnerable populations, under the rule of law.

Professor Lefebvre delves into the ideals of philosopher Michel Foucault, who defined morality based in moral code and moral conduct. According to Foucault, moral codes are values recommended to individuals in civil society through “prescriptive agencies,” typically a form of government. Moral conduct is a body of “prescribed rules and principles” of morality and oral conduct in relation to the precepts that comprise the code. The latter is based in natural law, spiritual or philosophical ideology, and correlates with enacted legislation governing the entire society. Lefebvre interprets Foucault’s standards for caring for oneself as being synonymous with transforming oneself.

Here, the focus shifts into the philosophical nature of the care of self with the ancient understanding that personal-care is a “self-sufficient moral end.” Such a concept can only be

achieved when the individual exercises the freedom and choice to care for her or himself. Additionally, the author maintains that one's ability to properly care for her or himself can only be presumed if the person(s) reside in a civilized society where it is customarily acceptable for she or he to do so. Therefore, the author concludes that human rights are a societal burden, one that is representative of democracy and civilization, and cultivates an environment wherein such rights can be freely exercised. Otherwise, it is but a tyrannical government, and a despotic society laden with a façade of progression comprised of members of dominant society who wield the very protective instruments to violate the rights of those it claims to champion.

Lefebvre also avers that a person who adheres to modern age (“code based”) ethics, which subdues “ancient morality,” is part of a new moral experience. Thus, modern morality becomes the component of self-ethics and focuses on how one has subjugated the self to a societal code. From here, Lefebvre analyzes Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy as an attempt for women to perceive themselves as a reflection of human rights. According to the author, Wollstonecraft delineates the need for women to be the instruments of their own destiny, to release themselves from the bonds of the superficial, and to become the ultimate goal of human rights—being viewed “as human rather than female beings” (p. 30).

Wollstonecraft's view that women should use human rights as a means to attain one's true purpose appears to be progressive for her milieu, but this remains problematic. Wollstonecraft's philosophy seeks to establish the criterion for certain women to live their lives against the set values that men have established for them, which demands that her measure of self-realization be the standard for *those* women. This becomes a different form of the same domineering act of men in authority, and the gratuitous unintended exclusivity consequence of whom she accuses. Also noteworthy is that during her time women also only

referred to white women as did the succeeding women's suffrage movement. Had she set the standards for all persons, regardless of gender and status, this flaw would have been easily remedied. As such, Lefebvre accurately discusses Wollstonecraft's revolutionary philosophy as a clearly defined doctrine of man versus woman.

Lefebvre also summarizes human rights doctrine as outlined by Lynn Hunt, an advocate for "sentimental education" who argues that society must be taught to have concern for others. Only then can human rights become a normal part of societal ethics, resulting in universal protection of the rights of *all* its members.

In the second section of his work, Lefebvre explores human rights criticism through the lens of two philosophers, Charles Malik and Eleanor Roosevelt, and their work in drafting the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Malik urged humanity to reform its thinking into the original purpose of human rights. Such a reformation, Malik argued, would cause society to become *modern* in the sense that all of humanity would reach the purpose for which human rights advocates. This definition stands in contrast to what many have narrowly defined as modernity—technology, materialism and collectivism. Malik aptly observes that human rights are the balm to ease these modern ailments which plagued modern civilization—and the primary contributors to human rights violations.

However, Roosevelt's general perspective was that the individual should relate to the world as a form of self-realization. The author admits that Roosevelt does not iterate human rights as *the* mechanism for the care of self to achieve this elevated state of being, but the activist did tout how it may be implemented as a way of life. Moreover, Lefebvre elucidates the philosophical aspect of early human rights doctrine through *Human Rights and the Care of the Self*, tackling opposing views as argued by early thinkers. He concludes that the care of self

permeates the body of human rights ideology, though it may not have originally been addressed in those terms, thus rendering the text appropriate for students and researchers of philosophy, political science, anthropology and human rights.

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