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THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN STEINBECK.
 ED. STEPHEN K. GEORGE. LANHAM,
 MARYLAND: SCARECROW PRESS, 2005. 199 PP.

REVIEWED BY BRIAN RAILSBACK

MANY REVIEWERS AND CRITICS of John Steinbeck's works are irritated by or at least uncomfortable with the author's desire to insert, in a sometimes heavy-handed way, moral meaning into his books. Steinbeck's natural impulse to instruct the reader on moral ideas became an increasingly overt element in his work as he grew older. His last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, is a study of moral disintegration and possible redemption; the last book published in his lifetime, *America and Americans*, is an unabashed sermon to his fellow citizens. I count myself among those critics who see Steinbeck's moral didacticism as a weakness, mercifully suppressed in his greatest works. *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck* is a collection of very interesting essays that bravely encounter Steinbeck's moral philosophizing head-on. Aside from criticism from reviewers and scholars for occasional moralizing, Steinbeck's work suffered at times in an entirely different way. As Allene M. Parker's essay, "Of Death, Life, and Virtue in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*," indicates, the disturbing but important ethical questions Steinbeck raises may account for much of the suppression or outright banning of his works. For some time we have needed a book that provides a careful reckoning of the moral philosophy associated with Steinbeck and his work. Now we have it.

The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck has been thoughtfully structured by editor Stephen K. George (he acknowledges help overall on the project from his editorial board, consisting of Richard Astro, Patrick K. Dooley, Richard E. Hart, and Luchen Li). The Foreword and Introduction neatly define the book's

operating definition of “moral philosophy.” Part I consists of broad applications of the terminology, with five essays that take a sweeping look at Steinbeck’s moral philosophy through several books. In Part II, the eight essays are more focused on moral implications in particular works or characters—*The Winter of Our Discontent* and Cathy/Kate of *East of Eden* rightfully figure prominently in this section.

In his Foreword, Hart observes that in a time of “applied” philosophical ethics and explorations of literature and morality, we are overdue for a careful look at the author: “John Steinbeck has not been rigorously examined or fully appreciated as a contributor to moral philosophy.” What the contributors to this volume collectively demonstrate, Hart asserts, is “that Steinbeck was not just a superb experimental stylist, social critic, and, in many ways, the conscience of America. He was, as well, a moral philosopher who probed deeper than nearly any other American writer the contours of individual and societal ethics.” This statement may overstate the case a bit (many great American authors have examined individual and societal ethics), but it does set up the intention of the book well. The Introduction by George and Li adds weight to Hart’s assertion by noting Steinbeck’s readings in moral philosophy, his high moral purpose, and his ability to make readers thoughtfully live in his characters’ ethical failures and successes. What is refreshing about the Introduction and the book that follows is the lack of any apology for Steinbeck’s overt moral viewpoint—this volume clearly embraces it.

Possibly one of the best definitions of Steinbeck’s moral philosophy is offered in the first essay, “John Steinbeck’s lower-case utopia: Basic Human Needs, a Duty to Share, and the Good Life,” by Patrick K. Dooley. For both Aristotle and Steinbeck, Dooley writes, “genuine moral goodness, genuine human happiness, and genuine human development are three ways to describe the same thing: a well-lived and fulfilling human life in a good society.” The possibility or frustration of this life depends on the benign or malignant wants created by individuals or a society. Dooley carefully examines Steinbeck from this point of view in *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Travels with Charley*, and *America and Americans*.

Three essays that follow examine Steinbeck’s moral philosophy from more specific perspectives. Joseph Allegretti’s “John Steinbeck and the Morality of Roles: Lessons for Business Ethics” is, as he points out, unfortunately relevant in these post-

Enron times; his essay contains an interesting discussion, through *The Grapes of Wrath*, of the dilemma created when the role one inhabits has its own morality which may overwhelm one's personal morality (the "tractor men" of *Grapes* provide one example). John H. Timmerman's "John Steinbeck: An Ethics of Fiction" (reprinted) examines Steinbeck's "Intrinsic Ethics" (what qualities inherent in the work suggest its ethical position?) and "Extrinsic Ethics" ("how the author presents the work to the reader"); Timmerman succinctly touches on several sources and Steinbeck works. John J. Han takes an unusual and interesting approach by considering Steinbeck's fiction—*Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle* in particular—from Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's perspective in "I Want to Make 'Em Happy: Utilitarian Philosophy in Steinbeck's Fiction."

An excellent reading of *The Winter of Our Discontent* occurs in Barbara A. Heavilin's "The Existential Vacuum and Ethan Allen Hawley: John Steinbeck's Moral Philosophy." Considering Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* as a background, Heavilin examines a culture that is dangerously close to fostering in its people an "existential vacuum"—defined as "a psychic emptiness brought on by a lack of a sense of meaning." Yet through the potential of "self-transcendence," Hawley may overcome the vacuum and therefore, curiously, his story is a tale of hope (and caution) for Americans. Stephen K. George's essay, "'The Disintegration of a Man': Moral Integrity in *The Winter of Our Discontent*," complements Heavilin's essay, as he explores the novel by focusing on Hawley's moral fall and "rebirth."

The most startling essay of the book is Richard E. Hart's "Moral Experience in *Of Mice and Men*: Challenges and Reflection." Hart challenges many of the arguments made in the book in which he wrote the Foreword and to which he contributed an essay:

Though I am a philosopher for whom ethics is a specialty, I choose not to approach *Of Mice and Men* as a moral theorist, considering it generally fruitless to ponder whether Steinbeck represents and applies a certain type of ethical theory—is he a Kantian deontologist, a utilitarian in the manner of Bentham or Mill? Does he embrace "virtue ethics"? Is he Aristotelian or Platonist or Marxist in leaning, absolutist or relativist? There can be no reasonable or definitive answer

to such questions because Steinbeck was not interested in philosophic theory divorced from lived experience. This is not to say, however, that he was not interested in morality and raising ethical questions in and through his work. (62)

This challenge raises the level of discussion throughout the book, and thereby makes *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck* all the more interesting. As an editor, George was wise to include this essay; rather than ride with the premise of the book, he allows it to be challenged and therefore more thoroughly considered. Hart analyzes *Of Mice and Men* as a portrayal of racism and sexism. Ultimately he sees the text as one in which “moral questions become as compelling as they are inevitable” (70).

In the spirit of the book’s ability to field a wide variety of perspectives (something Steinbeck, I think, would have applauded), two essays exploring the absence of ethics—specifically, the case of Cathy/Kate—come to very different conclusions. Stephen K. George, in “The Emotional Content of Cruelty: An Analysis of Kate in *East of Eden*,” effectively argues that Kate is more than a monster, she is a human being driven by her fear of vulnerability toward a pathological hatred of what she fears most: men. George’s reading of Kate is one of the best explications I’ve read concerning this character’s lack of any identifiable morality. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, in “‘No Sanctuary’: Reconsidering the Evil of Cathy Ames Trask,” takes the more familiar line that Kate lacks something her more developed human fellows possess (indeed, Steinbeck recognizes the same thing in the novel). Aguiar sees Kate as a “uniquely pre-lapsarian creation”—a kind of monster outside normal bounds of human behavior, and therefore a character who “should not be judged through the lens of traditional morality.”

The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck is a finely edited, well organized discussion of an aspect of Steinbeck’s art that has long begged for a comprehensive study. The strengths of the book include its stimulating variety of viewpoints, its stellar editing, and its willingness to boldly commend what many critics—myself included—tend to see as the source of Steinbeck’s weakness in some of his works. *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck* is a collection of essays that readers fascinated by Steinbeck’s accomplishments will go back to again and again.