

Exploitation and Unfairness

Wendy van der Neut

Abstract paper for workshop 'Exploitation: conceptual, normative and political perspectives'
Manchester workshops in Political Theory, Aug 31 - Sept 2, 2011

Postal Address

Wendy van der Neut

School of Law

University of Edinburgh

Old College, South Bridge

Basement Mailboxes

Edinburgh EH8 9YL, United Kingdom

W.Van-Der-Neut@sms.ed.ac.uk

This paper analyses the contemporary philosophical debate on exploitation. The term exploitation is often associated with the writings of Karl Marx and (neo-)Marxist writers, but in recent years the philosophical debate on exploitation has revived within a liberal framework as well. In this debate it is generally agreed that the moral concept of exploitation means taking advantage of someone in a wrongful manner. Exactly what makes exploitation wrong is, however, the subject of much disagreement. This is especially true for so-called 'consensual exploitation': transactions to which all parties agree voluntarily, rationally and sufficiently informed and that are beneficial for all parties, but that are still deemed exploitative. After all, it is not so self-evident how transactions can be wrong if they are fully voluntary and beneficial for all parties involved. The central question in the present-day philosophical debate on exploitation is therefore: what is wrong with consensual exploitation?

The paper starts by briefly spelling out four competing answers to the question of what is wrong with consensual exploitation. It will show that three of them are criticized for conflating the wrongness of specific transactions with the injustice of the background circumstances in which those transactions take place, and that the fourth, which will be called

the 'fairness account' of exploitation, is consequently currently by far the most widely accepted understanding of exploitation. The paper argues however that, at least in the context of exploitation, the concept of (un)fairness is 'morally empty'. And this, it argues, entails not only that a fairness account of exploitation cannot live up to its promise of explaining the 'transaction specific wrongness' of exploitation without relying on background injustices, but also that it, far from offering the most promising answer to what is wrong with exploitation, ultimately does not offer an answer at all.