

MILTON FISK

FEBRUARY 15, 1932 – SEPTEMBER 8, 2022

On September 8, 2022, Milton Thomas Fisk died at the age of ninety in Bloomington, Indiana, where he had spent most of his life. Milton was born on February 15, 1932, in Lexington, Kentucky. His father, Edward Thomas Franklin Fisk, was a painter and printmaker on the faculty of the University of Kentucky. Until the end of his life, Milton remained the manager of a sizable collection of his father's art. (For more information about Edward Fisk, including a gallery of some of his paintings, go to <https://www.edwardfisk.com/>.) Milton's mother was Lucy Aloysia Young (Fisk), a professor of literature at Transylvania University, a private liberal-arts institution also in Lexington.

He got his early education in Lexington, and then went to Georgetown Preparatory School in North Bethesda, Maryland, the only Jesuit boarding school in the United States. From there, he went on to earn a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry from Notre Dame (1953), and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale (1958). He returned to Notre Dame and then to Yale to teach for a while but was not happy at either place.

In 1966, Thomas Langan, then chair of our department, persuaded him to come to Indiana University as an associate professor. Langan had been appointed chair here for the academic years 1965–68, following the abrupt resignation of Alan Donagan, but had requested and was granted a leave of absence for 1967–68, to accept a visiting position at the University of Toronto. He never came back. This left the philosophy department in urgent need of a chair. Milton himself was appointed "acting chair" for the 1967–68 academic year, even though it was only his second year in Bloomington.

In that same year, Milton served with Paul D. Eisenberg, who had arrived with him in the fall of 1966, on a search committee charged with recommending an outside candidate to be hired as chair of the department. That committee ultimately recommended George Nakhnikian, who arrived in the fall of 1968.

Milton's early writings focused on logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of science. In 1969, he went to England on what was apparently a pre-negotiated sabbatical. When he returned the following year, he had been "radicalized." This was the heyday of the anti-Vietnam-war protests, and Milton agreed with them. He has said he was a "closet socialist" even before that time, but afterward he began to write more and more on social topics. He continued this to the end of his life, authoring his last book on the topic *Ethics and Social Survival*. For many years, Milton taught a popular course in Marxism in our department, eventually branching out to later European philosophers as well, such as Habermas. He once remarked that it was "about time" our department acknowledged that there was more to philosophy than early-twentieth century "analytic" figures.

Milton retired in 1997, but remained active in departmental events for many years. He was an "activist," and frequently showed up at the Bloomington Farmers' Market and other events, passing out literature and talking to the general public.

KATY ABRAMSON

Milton Fisk and I stood at one another's periphery—interacting nearly exclusively as colleagues in a casual way after colloquia and at assorted departmental receptions. Perhaps for that very reason it's remarkable the way his thoughtfulness, consideration and sincere interest stood out to me. I remember, for instance, that in my very first year at Indiana he was present at some colloquia at which I'd asked a question, and in the reception later took such an unusually sincere interest in how the subject of my question to the speaker was related to my own work that I found myself thinking 'is this guy for real?' He very much was.

MARCIA BARON AND FRED SCHMITT

Milton had retired when Fred and I joined the department in 2001, but until the emeriti lost their offices, he was a real presence in Sycamore Hall. He was very welcoming to the new people, and always up for going out for lunch or coffee. I am so glad that he had his office for a while, anyway, after we arrived, or we might have missed out on a friendship with this remarkable Mensch. Fortunately, we kept up the friendship (though naturally we are wishing now we had taken more hikes together, had gone out to Greene County to see his cabin, had had meals and coffee together more often, and so on).

He was remarkable for just how active he was in so many different ways: physically (swimming, hiking, biking, jogging—though the last two I'm sure he gave up several years ago, but he was doing this well into his 70's, and swimming and hiking well into his 80's); writing philosophy (including a book he published in 2016, *Ethics and Social Survival* (Routledge)); very admirable political activism, accomplishing a great deal, and having a good time doing it, never sowing discord or an us-against-them mentality; travel (something we always loved hearing him talk about); and just being a wonderful, kind, individual, who always was of good cheer, despite being acutely aware of horrendous injustice and working tirelessly to address it. We admire him greatly for being deeply engaged in addressing injustices while at the same time so fully enjoying life.

We feel lucky to have known him and will cherish such memories as going hiking with him on the Amy Weingartner Branigin peninsular trail.

PAUL EISENBERG

The Department of Philosophy at IU was very different in 1966 than it was soon to become. Apparently the department had not been rated highly; and in an effort to improve, the members chose to appoint Milton, a Yale Ph.D. who had already been teaching for a couple of years (at Notre Dame and at Yale) and me (just finishing my doctorate at Harvard). Even with the two of us "on board" the department still needed improvement, and so the search began for a new chair from elsewhere.

Milton and I were put in charge of the search committee, and although Milton and I were never close friends, we did get along well with one another. As I recall, he was easy to work with, and we soon recognized that George Nakhnikian was the man for us. After all, he'd been able to make the philosophy department at Wayne State a very good one indeed. And as I recall, it was easy to persuade George to come to IU, as the new chair of the department of philosophy. He must have realized that he could build an even stronger department here at IU Bloomington than he had at Wayne State. Our offer went out to him, and happily for IU he accepted—and brought with him from Wayne State both Hector-Neri Castaneda and Nino Cocchiarella. Learning of George's coming, all but one of the older members of the department resigned—presumably in fear that George would somehow look unfavorably upon them and their work (as indeed he would have done); so not only did George come with his two colleagues from Wayne State, but he wanted also to appoint and did appoint as four assistant professors men from highly ranked departments.

George did not serve long as departmental chair—only four years in fact. I believe that Bo Clark followed him as chair. I got tenure in 1973, as I recall telling my then dying mother. I can't recall offhand the year when I became chair, but I do know that I was already the chair in 1975 and served for eleven years. By contrast, Milton didn't have any particular administrative responsibilities, and I imagine he gratefully returned to concentrating on his teaching.

ADAM LEITE

When I think of Milton, the first word that comes to my mind is “kindness”.

I did not know Milton well. I arrived at IU as a junior faculty member a year or two after he had retired, and we were never more than friendly acquaintances. Still, he always greeted me with a smile and asked how I was doing in a way that indicated genuine interest. Something about the way that he leaned in as he asked, turning one ear as if to listen, left me feeling that he really wanted to know. I had a sense that I was interacting with someone with the gracious manners of a bygone era.

A few years into my time at IU the two of us had lunch at Dragon Express at the corner of Third and Jordan (as it was then called). Milton told me about his current work. At the time he was very concerned about attempts to privatize Bloomington's water supply. I was impressed by the way in which his philosophical work and social activism formed a seamless whole. He lived with an admirable unity of purpose.

During our conversation we discussed some of my work in epistemology, and I expressed my struggles to find a way to do research that I found meaningful while meeting the demands of tenure. In response he told me about the trajectory of his own academic career and his shift from logic, philosophy of science, and metaphysics to political and social philosophy. The lesson I took away – and I think it was the lesson he intended me to hear – was a simple one: Don't be afraid to follow your interests. It was a very good piece of advice.

KIRK LUDWIG

Milton had retired for some years when I arrived at Indiana University in 2010 but he was still an active member of the community. I think I met him at a colloquium or a department lunch at the Tudor Room. We talked about each other's research and he was telling me about his latest book project, [*Ethics and Social Survival*](#), published in 2016, in which he argued that ethics has a grip on us only through serving our deep-seated need to live together. He was as many people can testify an extremely sweet and gentle personality and a generous person always interested in talking philosophy. When my work on institutional agency developed we talked a bit more about political philosophy, and we were going to make some time to talk more seriously but never quite got around to it. Now I wish that I had made more time for that. He was one of the founding members of the modern department at IU, dedicated to philosophy and social justice. His legacy will last a long time.

TIM O'CONNOR

My first encounter with Milton was in a private chat in his office when I was a job candidate at IU. He wanted to see how this young metaphysician would respond to a Rorty-esque challenge to the correspondence theory of truth. It was a friendly but focused and down-to-business conversation, and I learned on the spot that Milton was a serious philosopher who liked to go right to the heart of fundamental issues. This impression was reinforced at the post job-talk party, when he and three other senior members of the department struck up a rather intense conversation with me at 1:45am, pressing me on a new and subtle objection to a thesis I had advanced in the talk. This intimidating conversation lasted 45 minutes, and, adding to my challenge, it of course had been preceded by the consumption of a considerable amount of beer. (I was finally taken home at 3am, only to be picked up for breakfast at 7am. Campus visits these days aren't what they used to be.)

Two years later, I moved into Milton's neighborhood. We lived two miles out from campus and Milton walked there every day. When our schedules coincided we would walk together. Despite being a good bit younger than he was, I struggled to keep up – he was long-legged as well as having excellent stamina. His vigorous walking matched his intellectual intensity. On these walks, Milton would raise various philosophical issues, and he expected thoughtful answers to them. Heading out the door, I would mentally gear up for being asked to grapple with something I possibly hadn't previously given much thought to. Thinking carefully while walking quickly was an unfamiliar combination that Milton taught me to embrace.

In faculty discussions, Milton was a strong advocate for the interests of graduate students. He also had an admirable way of vigorously pressing a minority position on a contentious departmental issue without ever losing his cool or even seeming to be upset that his opinion would not prevail. Perhaps that was why Mike Dunn tapped him to chair a bylaws overhaul committee on which I also served. This was a painfully slow

process, as the dept would pick over proposed changes at an approximate rate of one paragraph per long meeting. (As always, there had been 'issues' from the past that colored people's views on what needed to be changed or left firmly in place.) Milton was amazingly patient in seeing this all through, despite (my impression that) he wasn't himself deeply invested in much of it and was about to retire.

Finally, despite rarely interacting with him after his retirement, I continued to be reminded of Milton on a bi-monthly basis by the appearance in my mailbox of the *Catholic Worker* newsletter, founded by Dorothy Day, the influential socialist who converted to Catholicism (retaining her socialism). As a young philosopher, Milton was a Catholic who took a sabbatical in South America and came back a non-Catholic socialist. My assumption has always been that Milton, knowing that I was a Christian, subscribed me to this publication, hoping it would steer me in the direction of the social-political causes that became the organizing focus of his life. We had a few brief exchanges on such matters, but I regret we never found occasion to talk all this through. I am sure such conversations would have enriched how I think about such matters, whatever our differences. Sure, I can read his work, helpfully organized at <https://www.miltonfisk.org/>. But that's no substitute for talking with a philosopher, when they are as direct, unpretentious, and open to dialogue as Milton was.

ANDY RUFF

Milton Fisk was an incredible and wonderful human being. He was the best kind of activist -- informed, thoughtful, and tireless. Never self-righteous, consistently open-minded and always learning while still always doing the hard work both on the ground in the field and also on paper. He was a constant source of inspiration and a model of how to approach the harshness and injustices in the world by doing good, hard work for progressive change, keeping the faith, and at the same time keeping an eye on the beauty in the world and the joy in life and in people. His legacy and memory will continue to motivate, inspire and guide.

PAUL SPADE

Milton Fisk was one of the "old guard" in our department. By that I mean he was already well-established here (six years) by the time I arrived in the summer of 1972.

At that time, Milton was well known around the department for his annual "cookout" with "leftist-minded" graduate students and faculty at a cabin he had built in Owen County, just west of Bloomington. I never attended (although I was invited), but it was informally (and fondly) known around the department as the annual "Commie picnic." Legend (which I cannot confirm) has it that they would sit out around a bonfire, have a tasty meal, debate the pros and cons of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" or whatever the burning issue of the day was, and then all join in for a rousing chorus of "Solidarity Forever." (As I say, I cannot confirm this, although there was no doubt some gentle teasing in the legend.)

Milton was very much an “outdoors man.” He climbed mountains (although not here in south-central Indiana!), took long walks, and very much enjoyed being out in “nature.” I recall that once, many years ago, I went to Bloomington’s weekly Farmers’ Market on a late fall Saturday, and bought a little package of strange-looking fruit called “paw paws.” I had heard of them, but had never actually seen them. When I packed one as part of my lunch the following Monday, I came into the office and Milton not only *instantly* knew what it was, but also knew where there were a couple of paw paw trees right here on campus, near Sycamore Hall. (I’ve never located them.)

Milton was always a good person to have on a dissertation committee. Back in 1993, I was directing a Ph.D. dissertation on Sartre’s account of “self-deception,” and Milton was a member of the committee. When it came time for the final oral examination, Milton walked into the examination-room with not only a copy of the dissertation itself but also with a well-worn copy of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*—in the original French from Gallimard publishers! Of course, he could have got this copy from any one of several used bookstores in town at the time. But no, as it turned out, Milton was thoroughly familiar with Sartre’s views, on self-deception and other topics. He asked some very penetrating questions! And this wasn’t the only such occasion; Milton was always a dependable and sometimes *surprising* member of a dissertation or thesis committee.

Even earlier, in the mid-1970s, I remember driving with Milton up to a meeting of the Indiana Philosophical Association in Indianapolis. This must have been shortly after I came to IU, because I had a pre-print draft version of Alvin Plantinga’s *The Nature of Necessity*, which Alvin had kindly sent me before its actual publication (Clarendon Press, 1974). I had of course eagerly read it, because it was all about “possible world” semantics, which was quite the rage then. Meanwhile, Milton had just published his own *Nature and Necessity: An Essay in Physical Ontology* (Indiana University Press, 1973). I was having a tough time making the transition from Alvin’s view to Milton’s. I no longer know exactly what the issue was, but at one point during our trip I asked Milton how *one* thing could possibly split into *two* things and yet each of the two things be the same as the original (or “identical with,” it, I forget the jargon). Finally, after a moment’s thought, Milton said: “Think of cellular division. Is the original cell still there afterward? And if so, which one is it? Or is it both?” And “the scales fell from my eyes”! I was thinking of traditional particles’ bumping into one another, whereas Milton was thinking of *biology*. I went on to finish his book with a new appreciation!

Milton taught me quite a lot. He was a treasure!

ALLEN WOOD

I first met Milton at Yale in Fall, 1964 -- hence just about 58 years ago. (A lot of water under the bridge since then!). Milton gave a talk on philosophy of science at Branford College -- the college most associated with philosophy at Yale (I was affiliated with it

when I was a Yale Professor 1996-2000). After Milton's talk and after the discussion, Milton and I had a long conversation and that is really when I got to know him.

After we came to IU in 2008, Milton showed me the manuscript of his last book --- in the field of ethics and political philosophy: *Ethics and Social Survival* (Routledge, 2016). Milton's provocative thesis is that ethics can and should be grounded on the conditions for the survival of a society. My first reaction was to ask whether he did not instead mean that ethics is grounded on the survival of a certain kind of society or the achievement of certain social ideals. Milton certainly found a place for these thoughts in his account, but he made a good case, both in his book and in conversations with me for the claim that the foundation of ethics was simply the need of human beings to live together in a society that is viable and has long term stability, On this foundation, Milton built a case for the importance of public goods and related themes that he had explored in other books he had authored over the years.

The main thing that always impressed me about Milton was the breadth of his interests. I think ethics and political philosophy were his chief interests, and these were connected to his sympathy with Marxism and with liberal democracy (which he never saw as separable values). But Milton also wrote on the philosophy of science and even published a logic book about the time I got to know him. Milton's interest in ethics, political philosophy and social justice were always connected to his social activism, which continued throughout his life.

REGA WOOD

What I remember most about Milton was his genuine sweetness and his openness.

He was all about helping other people, but oddly enough that drive to improve people's lives is quite often associated with acrimony and egotism. With Milton, it was quite otherwise.

In fact almost the only time I heard him say anything negative was on the last day I saw him, September 5. Tim O'Connor and I woke him up, and despite not feeling well, Milton let us persuade him to get up, don his hearing aides, and join us for a pleasant conversation. We encouraged him to reminisce about the old days. We asked about Norwood Russell Hanson whom Milton knew at Yale. Was he a nice guy? Yes, Milton said, as long as you agreed with him. And that is the nastiest thing I ever heard him say, apart from his opinions of politicians of a certain stripe.

Illness sometimes doesn't bring out the worst in people, but not Milton, even when he was confused and not hearing well. When he was in rehabilitation, if you visited him he assumed that people would want to see Doris, and so he apologized about her not being there. About Doris he once had something amusing to say. He said that when they decided to become a couple, she made him promise not to get arrested at any future protests. And he did promise, but he added: I guess you could just say I loved her that much.

Occasionally Milton's niceness was even a little unwelcome. At basketball games, he refused to boo the opposing team and he insisted on cheering for their best plays. At times when I was busy yelling at the umpire and urging the women on the visiting team to miss all their free throws, Milton would point out how well they had done.

I tried to convince him that this was a time for uncritical partisanship, not the appropriate occasion for the generosity of spirit he displayed. I even tried out pseudo erudition. The word 'fan' is Latin in origin, but it comes to us from the fanatical behavior of medieval enthusiasts for the Byzantine green and blue chariot racing teams who hated each other, and even occasionally rioted almost bringing to an end the emperor Justinian's rule. But I didn't convince Milton.

Milton was always grateful for an invitation to join me at department colloquia, and he was often enthusiastic about speakers for what were quite minor points in their presentation, and he made it a point to tell them so. Indeed, it seemed to me that he always wanted to share his enthusiasms, particularly his love of the wilderness and walking and his appreciation for his father's painting and his mother's beauty.

He took Allen and me out to explore Fisk woods, and he gave us a beautiful landscape painting by his father, the formidable artist, Edward Fisk.

Once I took Milton to lunch with the intention of picking his brain about his views on matter – matter, that is, in Aristotelian natural philosophy. I knew that Milton had written a no-holds barred article in which he argued convincingly that a case could not be made for positing prime matter. But I, as a medievalist, spend my time reading not about whether prime matter is a necessary posit, but about how it originated and in what substantial changes it plays a role. Milton had not only denied that prime matter could play an explanatory role, but he ridiculed the position, writing "Thus we can point neither to a philosophical nor to a scientific advantage stemming from a" language including prime matter. A proposal to adopt such language "comes to resemble a proposal to speak Russian mid-way in a conversation which has thus far been carried on unhampered in English." But Joseph Bobik in his comment on the article, after conceding Milton's main point suggested that "there are statements which, though they are not assertions of" unqualified substantial change, nonetheless pertain to unqualified change and appear to me to presuppose prime matter implicitly." So I wanted to find out whether Milton was convinced by Bobik's interpretation of that passage in the Aristotle's *Physics*. But what I found out was that Milton could barely remember that he wrote such an article. So in the nicest possible way but without beating around the bush, he let me know that I should forget about discussing Aristotelian physics with him and concentrate on something interesting like problems with health care policy.

He was so straight with people that you could not hold a grudge against him.

For example, he made it a point to seek someone out to say that had voted against tenure for them and exchange a few remarks about the situation. With the result that the two remained not good friends but cooperative colleagues, which is so important for the morale of our department.

We're grateful for his long years of service to the philosophical community here in Bloomington.