

# The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology<sup>1</sup>

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The question whether Marx's theory has a moral or ethical dimension is one of the most controversial of all issues of Marx interpretation. The difficulty is easily seen. On the one hand, Marx has a number of uncompromisingly negative things to say about morality. Moreover, after 1845 at least, he affirms that his own theory is not a utopian or ethical one but "real positive science". Yet, on the other hand, much of the language that he uses to describe capitalism is plainly condemnatory (for instance, that it is antagonistic, oppressive and exploitative). Does this not represent an inconsistency on Marx's part? Is he not moralizing and rejecting morality at the same time?

This paper will present a line of interpretation according to which Marx is not inconsistent. The interpretation depends on a contrast between certain doctrines typical of moral philosophy (which, it will be argued, Marx rejects) and the rejection of ethical values as such (to which, it will be argued, he is not thereby committed). Marx's antipathy to morality and moral theory as he found it in his own day is to be explained, I shall argue, by the role that morality plays, in his view, in helping to sustain the existing social order, as ideology.

It is only fair to say, however, that my interpretation involves a very considerable amount of reconstruction and projection from the very sparse evidence that we have of Marx's views on ethics. His extreme hostility to certain kinds of ethical value is well documented, but the reasons behind that hostility are much less explicit. Moreover, it is clear that Marx's views on ethics underwent considerable changes in the course of his intellectual career. To illustrate this, let us consider two quotations taken from opposite ends of that career. Marx writes in the "Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*" (written in 1843) as follows:

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The critique of religion ends in the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man; thus it ends in the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a debased, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), however, Marx calls it a "crime" to "pervert" the Party's "realistic outlook" with "ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French socialists".<sup>3</sup> It is tempting to see this change of attitude as a move on Marx's part from an initial endorsement of a distinctive ethical position to a subsequent rejection of ethical attitudes as such. In my view, however, this is mistaken. On the contrary, there is, in fact, a considerable degree of continuity between Marx's earlier and later attitudes towards morality; as I shall argue, Marx's mature rejection of received forms of morality is made from a position that is not ethically neutral and which has its basis in some of Marx's very earliest intellectual positions.

Before turning to Marx's explicit views, one further point should be made. When discussing Marx's attitude towards morality, it is important to bear in mind that three different things may be at stake. (1) There is, first, his attitude towards the moral principles and ethical beliefs actually at work in a particular society – its “ethical life”, if one will. (2) Secondly, there is his attitude towards the content of the moral doctrines advocated by moral philosophers within that society (which may or may not correspond directly to its ethical life). (3) Thirdly, there is his view not just of the content of moral doctrines but of their status (that is, roughly, his meta-ethical views). Most of Marx's pronouncements concern the first and the second topics and he has practically nothing to say on the third subject -- as is, in fact, hardly surprising. It is one of the mature Marx's most distinctive positions that the issues characteristic of "pure" philosophy -- and that includes, surely, general questions of ontology and epistemology -- are not so much problems to be solved as symptoms of a malaise: the detachment of ideas from life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, K., "Towards a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right. Introduction" in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), pp. 131-42, p.137.

<sup>3</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 19

<sup>4</sup> "The philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and realize that neither thoughts nor

## I Hegel on *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*

It is helpful to start, as Marx's own views on morality certainly did, by looking at Hegel's critique of Kant. Marx endorses Hegel's claim that morality, as embodied in Kant's moral philosophy, is, as they both put it, "abstract". What did they mean by this? Hegel expresses his criticisms of Kant's view of ethics at many places in his writings but his treatment of Kant in paragraphs 133-135 of the *Philosophy of Right* is particularly clear and helpful on this point. Hegel starts this discussion by taking up and partly endorsing Kant's idea of moral action as acting on the principle of "duty for duty's sake":

In doing my duty, I am by myself and free. To have emphasized this meaning of duty has constituted the merit of Kant's moral philosophy and its loftiness of outlook.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Hegel agrees with Kant that we act in accordance with moral rationality only if we act from the motive of duty (rather than from contingent, personal ends). Nevertheless, he goes on to ask, what is to determine what our duty is? It is this question, Hegel famously charges, that Kant fails to answer satisfactorily and this, in his view, nullifies the chief virtue of Kant's position: its endorsement of the idea of autonomy and moral rationality:

This is the same question as was put to Jesus when someone wished to learn from him what he should do to inherit eternal life. Good as a universal is abstract and cannot be accomplished so long as it remains abstract. To be accomplished it must acquire in addition the character of particularity.<sup>6</sup>

In consequence, Kant's ethical theory remains, Hegel argues, at the level of the "merely moral standpoint" (*der bloss moralische Standpunkt*). In consequence, it amounts to no more than an "empty formalism":

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language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life." (K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited and abridged by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 118)

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1967), para. 133, *Zusatz*

<sup>6</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1967), para. 134, *Zusatz*

... we must notice here that [Kant's] point of view is defective in lacking all articulation. The proposition: "Act as if the maxim of your action could be laid down as a universal principle", would be admirable if we already had determinate principles of conduct. That is to say, to demand of a principle that it shall be able to serve in addition as a determinant of universal legislation is to presuppose that it already possesses a content.<sup>7</sup>

Kantian morality is thus alleged by Hegel to be abstract in the sense that, while its principles may perhaps function as a test upon proposed actions, they do not determine the content of the particular action to be performed: they fail to make the transition from the universal to the particular, or, to put it in less Hegelian terms, they provide a necessary condition for determining whether an action is morally acceptable but not a sufficient one. If Kantian moral philosophy appears to have specific ethical content, then that can only be, Hegel claims, because that content has been surreptitiously imported from the existing institutions or codes of behaviour of the society in question:

... of course, material may be brought in brought in from outside and particular duties may be arrived at accordingly, but if the definition of duty is taken to be the absence of contradiction, formal correspondence with itself -- which is nothing but abstract indeterminacy stabilized -- then no transition is possible to the specification of particular duties.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel's own response to these difficulties flows from his contrast between morality (*Moralität*) and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). The alternative to abstract morality of the kind represented by Kant, in Hegel's view, is for the formal principles of morality to be given content thanks to the institutionalized ethical life represented by *Sittlichkeit*. *Sittlichkeit* thus resolves the indeterminacy inherent in the formal principles of *Moralität* in a way which is, he claims, itself rational. It can do this because, Hegel believes, customs and social institutions are themselves products of reason -- reason as embodied in the logic of historical

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<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1967), para. 135, *Zusatz*

<sup>8</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1967), para. 135

development. In other words, institutions are more than just a “tie-breaker” when the requirements of reason no longer serve to specify a particular action as right or wrong; they are themselves, in some historical sense, bearers of rationality. Earlier societies were characterized by a conflict between individual morality and institutionalized ethical life, but it is a mark of the fact that reason has completed its historical development, in Hegel's view, that modern society embodies the principles of *Moralität* within an institutionalized form of ethical life that is itself rational.

## II Marx on *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*

When Marx himself first deals with the issue of morality at any length it is in the context of a discussion of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. This work, the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, written in 1843, remained unpublished during Marx's lifetime (unlike the Introduction written for it, which he published separately) and so must be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, it does, in my view, give a clear picture of Marx's earliest views on morality.

Marx's starting point is to endorse Hegel's criticism of the "abstractness" and "formalism" of principles of *Moralität*, taken on their own. There is, he claims, a parallel between the abstractness of *Moralität* and the abstractness of the notion of private, individual rights.<sup>9</sup> Yet Marx challenges the account that Hegel gives of how *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* are to be reconciled. He disputes Hegel's claim that the *Sittlichkeit* of the modern state effectively counteracts the separation between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*. On the contrary, the deficiency of the modern state lies in the fact that it is simply the public expression of the abstractness of private life:

Hegel develops private rights and morals as such abstractions, from which it does not follow, for him, that the state or ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] of which they are presuppositions can be nothing but the society (the social life) of these illusions;

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<sup>9</sup> "Hegel calls private rights the rights of abstract personality, or abstract rights. And indeed they have to be developed as the abstraction, and thus the illusory rights, of abstract personality, just as the moral doctrine [*die Moral*] developed by Hegel is the illusory existence of abstract subjectivity." (Marx, K., *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), p.108.)

rather, he concludes that they are subordinate aspects of this ethical life. But what are private rights except the rights of these subjects of the state, and what is morality except their morality?<sup>10</sup>

Although this passage is somewhat ambiguous, I take it that Marx is making two rather different points. First of all, he is objecting to Hegel's account of the role played by the state (in the narrow sense of the organs of law and government). Hegel, according to Marx, presents the state as morally neutral and infers from this that it is subordinate to the *Sittlichkeit* of society in general. Marx, on the other hand, claims that this apparent neutrality is illusory. It is in its very distance from morality -- its own "abstractness" -- that the contemporary state shows itself to be representative of the "abstract" realm of private right: the state, says Marx, is "nothing but the society (social life)" of these "illusory" private rights. Thus Hegel has, Marx says, albeit unconsciously, performed a great service, for in his account of the state "he has done nothing but develop the morality of the modern state and modern private rights".<sup>11</sup>

Marx's second point concerns Hegel's view of the place of *Sittlichkeit* within state and society taken as a whole. As we have seen, for Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* supplements, but does not replace, *Moralität* by overcoming *Moralität*'s indeterminacy. Yet Marx's objection is that in the modern state *Sittlichkeit* in fact fails to play this role: instead of *Moralität* being a "subordinate aspect" of *Sittlichkeit*, it is *Sittlichkeit*, rather, which is determined by the abstract character of *Moralität*. This second criticism could itself be taken in two different ways. We could understand Marx as pointing to a particular deficiency of the modern social system. Under this system, we could understand him as saying, *Moralität* is not subordinate to *Sittlichkeit* but vice versa; but in another form of state and society (or, perhaps, in society which had gone beyond the state) things would be different and *Sittlichkeit* would indeed be such as to give *Moralität* a rational content. The objection to this interpretation is that it is not

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, K., *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), p.108.

<sup>11</sup> "What did that prove except that the separation of the present-day state from morals is moral, that morals are non-political and that the state is not moral?" (Marx, K., *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), p.108.)

open to Marx to resolve the opposition between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* in this manner because he cannot possibly accept the Hegelian premise on which it rests: that *Sittlichkeit* is itself a product of reason -- a doctrine quite at odds with Marx's professed commitment to historical materialism. Thus we are led to a second interpretation. On this view, Marx is critical of *any* separation between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* whatsoever. In which case, Marx would seem to require not just that we should go beyond the supposed abstractness of formal moral principles but, in some sense, that we should go beyond morality as such.

### III Marx's Objections to "Rights"

The nature of Marx's objections to morality is clarified further in the comments on the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1791) and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1793) to be found in his article "On the Jewish Question" (written, again, in 1843). Marx there takes issue with the idea of the rights of man in general:

... the so-called *rights of man*, as distinct from the *rights of the citizen*, are quite simply the rights of the *member of civil society*, i.e. of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community.<sup>12</sup>

Marx's objection here resembles those already raised in the *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*. The rights that are institutionalized in the political sphere do not counter the isolation of individuals from one another that is characteristic of their economic life ("civil society"); on the contrary, the conception of rights at stake simply mirrors the egoistic and individualistic structure of civil society, Marx asserts. Marx makes similar points when it comes to the discussion of specific rights such as the right to liberty. He quotes the two declarations' definitions of the right to liberty as follows:

"Liberty is the power which belongs to man to do anything that does not harm the rights of others", or according to the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1791:

"Liberty consists in being able to do anything which does not harm others."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marx, K., "On the Jewish Question", in L. Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 211-42, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, K., "On the Jewish Question", in L. Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 211-42, p. 229.

Marx's comments on these definitions again focus on the claim that such rights presuppose the "egoism" of the individuals whose freedom is being guaranteed:

Liberty is therefore the right to do and perform everything which does not harm others. The limits within which each individual can move *without* harming others are determined by law, just as the boundary between two fields is determined by a stake. The liberty we are here dealing with is that of man as an isolated monad who is withdrawn into himself... [The] right of man to freedom is not based on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the *right* of the restricted individual, restricted to himself.<sup>14</sup>

We shall return to these criticisms below, but, for the present, it is significant to note the distance that Marx has covered from the original, Hegelian criticism of Kantian *Moralität*. For Hegel, the objection to the idea of acting from duty was simply that the content of such duties remained indeterminate. For Marx, on the one hand, the target is much broader: the criticism of abstract morality does not just apply to the Kantian categorical imperative but, apparently, to rights-based moral theory in general. Moreover, Marx's objection is not just to the failure of the categorical imperative to determine the content of moral principles, but something rather different: he objects to the "egoism" and "separation" that are, he claims, presupposed by the notion of rights.

#### IV The Origins of Abstract Morality

For Hegel, the separation between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität* and their subsequent reconciliation are both stages in the self-development of *Geist* -- Hegel's word for the collective intellect in which we all, according to him, participate. Now Marx, as we have seen, agrees with (and, indeed, reinforces) Hegel's criticism of the abstractness of *Moralität*. But what he obviously cannot do is endorse Hegel's Idealist account of how this abstract form of moral life has come about. This is not an issue that Marx addresses in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, but in *The German Ideology* (written in 1845-46 but again not

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<sup>14</sup> Marx, K., "On the Jewish Question", in L. Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 211-42, p. 229.



published) he gives an account of the genesis of ideas in society that includes an account of the origin of abstract morality. Instead of seeing the development of ideas in the context of a series of stages in the self-development of *Geist*, Marx tries to explain them in relation to the stages of the division of labour in society.

The account of the production of ideas in *The German Ideology* starts from the claim that thought (including moral thought) is always constrained by the conditions and circumstances under which it is produced:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people.<sup>15</sup>

At this initial stage of social development, then, the connection between the lives led by individuals and the ideas to which they adhere was, according to Marx, immediately clear and intelligible. Yet that is now no longer the case, he believes. On the contrary, politics, law, morality, religion and metaphysics have turned into apparently independent bodies of thought with their own internal history and dynamics. The reason, Marx claims, is that, in the course of the division of labour, mental and manual labour have become separated from one another:

Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. (The first form of ideologists, *priests*, is concurrent.) From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of "pure" theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited and abridged by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited and abridged by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), pp. 51-52

The separation between mental and manual labour, Marx maintains, explains the formal, abstract character of moral ideas, but it does not lead to the formation of autonomous ideas in fact; the ideologists who produce ideas are still part of the ruling class whose interests their ideas represent. In this way the division of labour offers an explanation as to why such ideas should be accepted by those, the dominated classes, whose interests they go against. They are accepted because they are *apparently* disinterested. The ideologist, on this view, is like a bribed referee: able to influence the outcome of a game all the more effectively for the fact that he is falsely believed to be impartial. The ideologist is not engaged in deception, however. On the contrary. According to Marx, ideologists are *sincere* -- and, because they sincerely believe in the independence and objective validity of their own ideas, they are able to persuade others to accept them as such all the more effectively. Here, however, is the problem. How are we to suppose it to be true that the ideologists should both be constrained so that they produce ideas in the interests of the ruling class of which they are, appearances to the contrary, a part and that they (and those who accept the ideas from them) remain sincerely unaware of the nature of this connection? Why do they *think* that they are independent when in fact they are not? And, if they are not independent, how do their shared class interests with the rest of the ruling class assert themselves?

In any case, it is clear why Marx should be so hostile to morality: like any supposedly "pure" theory, morality represents a deceptive abstraction from the particular circumstances and material interests that it serves. The move to detach ideas that are the products of material interests from the interests that they represent is epitomized, for Marx, in Kant:

We find again in Kant the characteristic form which liberalism, based on real class interests, assumed in Germany. Neither he, nor the German burghers, whose whitewashing spokesman he was, noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeoisie had as their basis material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production. Kant, therefore, separated this theoretical expression from the interests it expressed; he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into *pure* self-

determinations of "free will", of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological determinations and moral postulates.<sup>17</sup>

For Marx at this stage "moral postulates" are, by their very nature, *ideological*.

#### V Marx's Attitude towards *Moralität*

Having surveyed these relatively explicit comments of Marx's on the nature of morality, we can now offer a reconstruction of his position. I shall present it, for the sake of clarity, in the form of seven theses:

- (1) Marx endorses Hegel's claim that Kantian *Moralität* is abstract, in the sense of failing to determine a specific content for ethical action.
- (2) Nevertheless, it is important that *Moralität* appears to be universal and disinterested. This is not simply a failure of perception on the part of moral philosophers but is, according to Marx, a product of the fact that moral ideas are themselves products of a certain stage within the division of labour.
- (3) In actual fact, however, moral content is given to moral principles from a source external to those principles themselves: the institutions that happen to exist in the society at the time. Thus, while *Moralität* may appear to be universal and timeless, its actual content -- its application in practice -- is particular and relative to the society in question.
- (4) Although *Moralität* appears to be disinterested, it (and the further content that determines its application in practice) is, in fact, the product of interests, whose role is ideologically concealed.

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<sup>17</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited and abridged by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p. 99

- (5) There is a further sense in which *Moralität* is "abstract", for Marx, and that is that it issues in principles or imperatives that remain at the level of mere injunctions. Thus moral theory falls under the strictures that Marx applies to philosophy in general: "the weapons of criticism", as he puts it, "cannot replace the criticism of weapons".<sup>18</sup>
- (6) *Moralität* is a "false" or defective moral theory, for the reasons given. But, although it is "abstract" in the sense of failing to give content to the action that is supposed to fall under its aegis, it is, in another sense, a reflection of actually existing society. If there is a defect, Marx believes, it lies in the "abstraction" of ethical life in society which *Moralität* faithfully reflects.
- (7) Thus Marx's meta-ethical position seems to be what we might, for want of a better phrase, call "institutional realism". Given Marx's strictures on the ideological nature of supposedly "pure" ethics, we must attribute to him the belief that values, or value-beliefs do not represent a realm of independently real items. Realism of that kind would be characteristic of ideological thought, in Marx's view. On the other hand, ethical values *do* embody the values implicit in the life of their community and, in that sense, they reflect a reality independent of themselves.

## VI The Alternative to *Moralität*

But what is Marx's alternative to *Moralität*? To answer this question let me start by addressing what is surely a nagging uneasiness about the plausibility of his position. The problem is clear: if the criticism of moral theory is to extend as widely as Marx appears to suppose his target must be some general feature of morality, not just the particular difficulties that follow from the Kantian attempt to derive content from the general idea of moral rationality.

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, K., "Towards a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right. Introduction" in *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), pp. 131-42, p.137.

It is clear that Marx, from the time of the Paris Manuscripts, sees social progress as characterized by a form of community in which (as he and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*) "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". Marx's ethical ideal is one of solidarity in which all advance together. In other words, Marx assumes that the good for individuals is complementary: in advancing my good I advance yours and in advancing your good you advance mine.<sup>19</sup> As I understand him, Marx believes that the idea of the complementarity of the good stands opposed to most, if not all, of the central family of moral concepts for the following reasons.

Speaking roughly, we may think of rights as permitting individuals to act in certain ways, in given circumstances, should they wish to do so, and to be able to claim correlative duties on the part of others. A duty, correspondingly, would require individuals to act in some way, whether they wished to or not. Liberty, as Marx understands it, is the ability of the individual to act as he or she happens to wish subject to certain limits (the ability of others to do likewise). Justice (if we do not think of it simply as a matter of rights and duties) can be thought of similarly as consisting of principles on which benefits and burdens are distributed in cases where interests conflict.

Put like this, these values do indeed have an important structural element in common. They all, in different ways, can be thought to provide a framework which regulates and limits the self-seeking behaviour of individuals. They are values that assume a conflict between (to put it in Kantian terms) "duty" and "inclination". And it is precisely this that Marx objects to.

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<sup>19</sup> Marx makes this view particularly clear in his 1844 discussion of James Mill. He writes:

Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings. In that event each of us would have *doubly affirmed* himself and his neighbour in his production. (1) In my *production* I would have objectified the *specific character* of my *individuality* and for that reason I would have enjoyed the *expression* of my own individual *life* during my activity and also, in contemplating the object, I would experience an individual pleasure... (2) In your use or enjoyment of my product I would have the *immediate* satisfaction and knowledge that in my labour I have gratified a *human* need, i.e. that I had objectified *human nature* and hence had procured an object corresponding to the needs of another *human being*... In the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the immediate expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my authentic nature, my *human, communal* nature.

"Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*", in L. Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 259-78, pp. 277-78

Just as Marx supposes that the categories of bourgeois economics eternalize the forms of bourgeois economic life, so, he believes, the treatment of ethics in terms of rights and similar values eternalizes a situation in which the good of each individual is independent and so can only be advanced at the expense of others.

It is in this context, in my view, that we should understand Marx's criticisms that moral concepts such as rights (including the right to liberty) presuppose a situation of "egoism" and "separation". As they stand, however, such criticisms are hardly persuasive. Hume, in the *Enquiry*, identifies it as a necessary condition for the "cautious, jealous virtue of justice" to have application that "benevolence" must not be so extensive "that every man has the utmost tenderness for every man, and feels no more concern for his own interest than for that of his fellows".<sup>20</sup> There is surely little doubt that this condition will be fulfilled in any society that we can reasonably envisage.<sup>21</sup> For there to be some kind of a conflict between duty and inclination it is by no means necessary for people to be wholly or even primarily egoistic; it is sufficient that there should be times when duty and inclination are not coincident, and even people who are very ready to acknowledge the claims made upon them by others are hardly likely to be free of such conflicts.

Marx's idea of the complementarity of the good, it should be noted, makes no such unreasonable assumptions about human nature. On the contrary, the claim that shared endeavours can bring benefits to the participants over and above the benefits flowing to them directly from the outcome itself, in my view, records a truth about the nature of human social life that is as important as it is obvious. But, on the other hand, nor is this fact sufficient to transcend the opposition between duty and inclination. The fact that our goods are mutually reinforcing does not remove the potential for a conflict of interests. Although the positive "externalities" envisaged by Marx may have the effect of overcoming the problem of the Prisoners' Dilemma by giving each participant in a joint enterprise a further incentive to

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<sup>20</sup> D. Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, in L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1986), pp. 168-343, pp. 184-85.

<sup>21</sup> Concerning the first point, Robert Nozick has an excellent example. It does not seem unreasonable to desire -- other things being equal -- to have the whole of the Harvard Library at one's individual disposal. Surely, he argues, there will always be some degree of scarcity in that sense.

cooperate, it does not remove the fact that the good for me is still different from the good for you and may be valued differently by the two of us. And indeed, even if that were not the case and Hume's supposition that every individual were "a second self to another"<sup>22</sup> were true, this would not be sufficient to transcend the question of justice, for, as Rawls has pointed out, questions of distribution still arise even here: there is still a question of how best to distribute potential welfare, even assuming that we are all selflessly impartial in our attitude towards who should receive it.

In the light of this, we must, I think re-interpret (and perhaps reduce in strength) Marx's claim that morality (conceived as a set of duties that override what one might otherwise do) is necessarily connected to "egoism" and "individualism" in such a way that opposition to egoism and individualism requires the transcendence of morality. One way of doing so would be to take Marx's claim as being simply that morality *promotes* egoism and individualism and that, therefore, to transcend morality would at least help to diminish the latter. It might seem that this claim is hardly difficult for Marx to establish. If it is true that capitalism promotes egoism and selfishness and it is true that morality promotes capitalism then the claim obviously follows. On the other hand, even if it is true that the morality characteristic of capitalism does indeed promote capitalism, it does not follow that all morality must promote egoism and selfishness. Why should there not be a socialist morality which promotes not egoism and selfishness but altruism and solidarity? The idea that the pursuit of justice is opposed to altruism and solidarity has seemed plausible to many, of course -- and not just on the Left. But it should not be accepted without question. After all, if we were to think of the principles of justice as establishing a kind of moral minimum -- a baseline or guarantee -- then it certainly seems plausible to think that someone who were sure of getting his or her due would be more, not less, inclined to be benevolent and public-spirited.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> D. Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, in L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1986), pp. 168-343, p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> A point made very well by Jeremy Waldron in his paper "When justice replaces affection: the need for rights", in *Liberal Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), pp. 370-91.

But, that said, two aspects of Marx's position still, in my opinion, deserve to be taken very seriously. The first is that we have no right to treat justice as the sole virtue of social institutions.<sup>24</sup> Marx would disagree utterly with Kant's remark that the problem of government could be solved by "a nation of devils, provided that they have understanding": in his view, the character of the individuals composing a society and the quality of the interactions that take place between them have overriding importance and institutions -- economic ones, above all, of course -- should be such as to develop these aspects of social life, so far as is possible.

It is also true, I believe, that conventional approaches to the study of welfare and distributive justice underestimate the interdependence of individuals' well-being. By treating the allocation of benefits and burdens as if it were a matter of dividing a "cake" of material (or quasi-material) goods whilst minimizing the disutility of expended effort, the abstraction characteristic of conventional theories of justice seriously understates the degree to which welfare has a social dimension. It is a truth too little recognized in contemporary discussion that one society may in the strictest sense be better off than another, despite having a smaller bundle of goods at its disposal, if the welfare accruing to its members from their participation in a satisfyingly cooperative common life is greater than in a more ruthless and unfeeling form of collective existence. We have no right to assume that, because bundles of goods are (relatively) easy to measure and social well-being almost impossible, the former matters more than the latter.

Thus Marx's reluctance to use the conventional language of rights and justice to condemn capitalism is intelligible, if not entirely persuasive. It is not that Marx thinks that exploitation, expropriation, oppression, slavery, misery (a few of the terms he applies to the capitalist system) are morally acceptable or that he believes that the language of ethical condemnation is epistemologically suspect.<sup>25</sup> He is, however, reluctant to use language that would suggest that these are forms of injustice for which "justice" (in the sense of giving

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<sup>24</sup> Or to assume that it is so related to the other virtues that once that virtue obtains in a society so, too, will all other significant virtues.

<sup>25</sup> What *is* suspect, for Marx, is an attitude towards politics that believes that ethically desirable changes can be brought about by appeals to ethical principles and disinterestedly held values.



"each their due") is the final and sufficient remedy. The best understanding of Marx's view of morality, in my view, lies in appreciating that, for him, socialism and communism represent a form of social existence that is ethically superior to capitalism, one mark of whose superiority consists in the fact that it has gone beyond morality.

## **Appendix**

### Allen Wood on Marxism and Morality

Marx's views on morality have, in recent years, generated a surprisingly extensive debate in the Anglo-American philosophical community. The most vigorous and original participant in that debate (to a large extent, in fact, its initiator) has been the American philosopher, Allen Wood. Many of the views presented in this paper come close, so far as I can judge, to Wood's, although the angle of approach is, of course, somewhat different. But our views do not, in fact, coincide completely and I would like to take up two points of disagreement. I want to take issue with two of Wood's claims: first, that Marx distinguishes between moral and non-moral goods and that, whilst rejecting the former, he endorses the latter. The second is that Marx believes that capitalism is just.

I have argued that Marx's critique of morality is focused on *Moralität*, and that, although he envisages the scope of the latter more broadly than just formal, Kantian ethics, *Moralität* is not to be understood so broadly as to force Marx to reject all ethical values whatsoever. Thus it might seem that I am attributing a similar distinction to Marx as Wood does in the distinction that he makes between moral and non-moral goods. I do not believe that this is so, however, for the way that Wood draws the distinction is as follows:

We all know the difference between valuing or doing something because conscience or the "moral law" tells us we "ought" to, and valuing or doing something because it satisfies our needs, our wants or our conception of what is good for us (or for someone else whose welfare we want to promote -- desires for nonmoral goods are

not necessarily selfish desires). This difference roughly marks off "moral" from "nonmoral" goods and evils as I mean to use those terms here. Moral goods include such things as virtue, right, justice, the fulfillment of duty, and the possession of morally meritorious qualities. Nonmoral goods, on the other hand, include such things as pleasure and happiness, things which we would regard as desirable even if no moral credit accrued from pursuing or possessing them.<sup>26</sup>

On the most natural reading of this passage, what Wood has in mind is quite clear. Non-moral good is "good" in an agent-relative or functional sense -- a sense of the word that can be accepted by the ethical egoist or moral sceptic. It is the sense in which a sharp knife is good for a murderer, just as it is for a brain surgeon, the sense in which to say of something that it is good carries no automatic force of impersonal, ethical commendation. Read in this way, my disagreement with Wood is clear. It seems me that when Marx commends (for instance) pleasure, freedom, self-affirmation and community or when he condemns (for instance) slavery, oppression, theft and alienation he is doing so in a straightforwardly ethical way: the thing in question is being commended (or condemned) not (just) because it is good (or bad) *for* some individual or group but because it is good (or bad) as such.

But it is only fair to say that there appears to be a backstream to the meaning that Wood gives to the idea of non-moral goods that somewhat muddies the distinction. He writes in a footnote to the passage quoted above:

Moral and nonmoral goods, though different in kind, may not be unrelated. It is arguable that qualities we esteem as morally good (such as benevolence, courage and self-control) are also nonmorally good for us to have. On the other hand, some moral theorists (such as utilitarians) believe that what is morally good is determined by what is conducive to the greatest nonmoral good.<sup>27</sup>

The last sentence just quoted seems to me to be of some importance. Depending on how we read it, it seems to me that either Wood and I (also) have a disagreement about how to understand utilitarianism or he is using the idea of a nonmoral good in a highly

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<sup>26</sup> A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 126-27.

<sup>27</sup> A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 254.

idiosyncratic way. As I read Mill (and if Mill is not a utilitarian, who is?) he believes that the pursuit of happiness supplies the supreme principle for the regulation and evaluation of conduct because happiness is good as such. Thus my happiness is good for me not just because it happens to be mine but, more importantly, because happiness is impersonally good in a way in which, by contrast, the murderer's sharp knife is not. Now either Wood disagrees with my reading of utilitarianism (and thinks that the goodness of happiness for the utilitarian is in each case agent-relative) or he is using the notion of the non-morally good to include both the impersonally good and the good which is agent-relative (despite the fact that the examples of the non-moral good that he gives all appear to fall into the latter category).

This issue matters, for the structure that Wood attributes to the utilitarian -- believing that conduct should be regulated by being directed towards a good end -- is clearly not confined to utilitarianism. Aristotelianism, for example, seems to have a similarly teleological structure. If Wood were to think that the Aristotelian *summum bonum* were a nonmoral good, then -- his misleading use of terminology apart -- I would have little about which to disagree with him. For it seems to me that a kind of consequentialism is the most appropriate ethical position to ascribe to Marx. If utilitarianism is (as Sen and Williams have suggested) "welfarist consequentialism", it seems to me that the best label for Marx's view is "developmentalist consequentialism", having regard to the fact that the goodness of the development in question is to be assessed objectively, with regard to some externally given conception of the human good, not subjectively, as in the forms of utilitarianism with which we are familiar.

The second claim of Wood's with which I wish to take issue is an equally striking one. In Wood's view, Marx believes that capitalism is just. The reason, he believes, is that, for Marx, the condition for an institution or practice being just is that it "harmonizes with and performs a function relative to" a given mode of production.<sup>28</sup> In support of this interpretation Wood cites the following passage:

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<sup>28</sup> A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 131.

The justice of transactions which go on between agents of production rests on the fact that these transactions arise out of the production relations as their natural consequences. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as voluntary actions of the participants, as expressions of their common will or as contracts that may be enforced by the state against a single party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They only express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it.<sup>29</sup>

This passage certainly seems to offer very strong support for Wood's reading. It can be pointed out, of course, that the passage is from *Das Kapital* Volume Three (which was left in draft form by Marx and only revised for publication by Engels) but, given how far any interpretation of Marx's views on ethics must rely on reconstructions using writings not published by Marx himself, that seems a rather weak objection. Another point to be made is that the word *Recht* in German can mean indifferently "law" and "right". The words for "just" and "unjust" -- *Gerecht* and *Ungerecht* -- thus signify that something is in conformity with law or otherwise. So it is very hard to signal in German (or, at least, in the German of Marx's day) a thought that is, by contrast, easily expressed in English: namely, that something may be in conformity with the law (legitimate) without being in conformity with justice; in German, one would have to say (apparently absurdly) that an action was *gerecht* but *ungerecht*. But again this point is quite weak. At best, it explains why it should be that Marx should have slipped into making the claim that existing institutions are just; it does not seriously call into question the idea that he thinks so.

But it must also be said that Wood's striking passage can be matched against another that seems to point equally clearly in the opposite direction. G.A. Cohen in his review of Wood<sup>30</sup> draws attention to a passage in the first volume of *Das Kapital* in which Marx comments on the relationship between capitalists and workers as follows:

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<sup>29</sup> *Das Kapital*, Volume 3 (New York, 1967), quoted A. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 130-31.

<sup>30</sup> *Mind*, 1983, pp. 440-45.

Even if the [capitalist class] uses a portion of that tribute [annually exacted from the working class by the capitalist class] to purchase the additional labour-power at its full price, so that equivalent is exchanged for equivalent, the whole thing still remains the age-old activity of the conqueror, who buys commodities from the conquered with the money he has stolen from them.<sup>31</sup>

To which passage Cohen offers the following powerful comment:

Now since, as Wood will agree, Marx did not think that by capitalist criteria the capitalist steals, and since he did think he steals, he must have meant that he steals in some appropriately non-relativist sense. And since to steal is, in general, wrongly to take what rightly belongs to another, to steal is to commit an injustice and a system which is "based on theft" is based on injustice.<sup>32</sup>

Granted that Marx believes that the capitalist steals in a non-relativist sense, only two possibilities seem open. Either, Cohen to the contrary, Marx does not believe that theft is unjust or else there is a serious discrepancy in his beliefs: he believes that capitalism is unjust, but he also believes (falsely) that he does not believe that capitalism is unjust. In favour of the former interpretation is the point made about the notion of *Recht* made earlier: if *gerecht*, for Marx, means only "in conformity with the established laws" it is clear how a practice could be "theft" (and hence to be condemned in an impersonal, non-relative way) whilst at the same time being *gerecht*.

Against both Wood and Cohen, however, I would like to offer a different interpretation according to which Marx can consistently both believe that principles of justice are products of, and are limited by, given modes of production and, at the same time, believe that capitalism is unjust. To present my interpretation, let me turn to the critical remarks made by Marx against the programme of the German Social-Democratic party -- the "Critique of the Gotha Programme". The discussion to which I wish to draw attention concerns the initial stage of a future communist society, not, as he puts it, "as it has *developed* on its own

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<sup>31</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 728.

<sup>32</sup> *Mind*, 1983, pp. 440-45, p. 443.

foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society".<sup>33</sup> This stage of society will, Marx asserts, still bear "the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges"<sup>34</sup> and, for this reason, its principle of distribution will not be the same as in a higher stage of communist society:

Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society -- after the deductions have been made -- exactly what he gives to it... He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such and such an amount of labour (after deducting his labour for the common funds), and with this certificate he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as costs the same amount of labour. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another.<sup>35</sup>

Marx notes that in this respect the economic relations of (the initial stage of) communism in fact resemble those of commodity production, to the extent that both embody the principle of the exchange of equal values.<sup>36</sup> The basis for this exchange is, of course, very different for, under the communist system, no one has anything to offer in exchange except his or her labour. Nevertheless, Marx notes, the transaction is still one involving "equal right". It is the comment that he makes next, however, that is, in my view, particularly significant:

Hence *equal right* here is still in principle -- *bourgeois right*, although principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange only exists *on the average* and not in the individual case.<sup>37</sup>

What Marx is saying in this passage, if I read him right, is that bourgeois right is indeed (as Wood's passage from Volume 3 indicates) a product of and limited by a particular

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<sup>33</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, pp. 17-18.

<sup>36</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 18.

mode of production. But from the fact that that standard is produced by a particular society it does not follow that the society itself automatically meets the standard in question. On the contrary, Marx seems to be saying, quite plainly, just the opposite: that bourgeois right is a standard which capitalist society itself fails to meet (in which "principle and practice are... at loggerheads"). In other words, capitalism is a society with a contradiction at its heart: which fails to meet the standards that it sets for itself. The initial phase of communist society redeems the standard of bourgeois right and is, in that sense, just in a way that capitalism is not. Nevertheless, this conception of justice is tainted: "In spite of this advance, this *equal right* is still constantly stigmatized by a bourgeois limitation."<sup>38</sup>

There are important reasons, in my view, why Marx is reluctant to condemn capitalism as unjust, but the fact that he thought it was just is not one of them. Perhaps a slightly strained analogy might help to understand Marx's dilemma. Let us take, as an example, the ideal of "gentlemanliness" as it was found in Great Britain up till the Second World War, understanding thereby (amongst other things) certain standards of reticence, courtesy and unwillingness to resort to force. Now concede, at least for the sake of argument, that this ideal was the product of a set of institutions and social practices that involved steep class divisions, fiercely (if informally) enforced systems of social exclusion and a highly unequal distribution of power between the sexes. Let us concede too that some of these institutions and practices led to behaviour (for instance, contemptuous and violent treatment of wives by husbands) that stood in flagrant contradiction to the accepted code of gentlemanly behaviour. Would one then want to condemn such behaviour as "ungentlemanly"? I think that the most natural answer would be both yes and no. Yes, to the extent that the behaviour produced by the institution violates that institution's own moral code; no, to the extent that that moral code itself appears to be limited and tainted. If I am right, then Marx's reluctance to condemn capitalism as unjust in case he might be thought thereby to be endorsing the bourgeois ideal of justice has similar grounds.

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<sup>38</sup> K. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme", in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), Vol. 3, pp. 9-30, p. 18.

In further support of this interpretation, let me quote a passage from Volume 1 of *Das Kapital*. According to Marx, "the wage-form... extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus-labour. All labour appears as paid labour."<sup>39</sup>

This illusion (as Marx considers it to be) is of the very greatest significance. He goes on:

We may therefore understand the decisive importance of the transformation of the value and price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. All the notions of justice [*Rechtsvorstellungen*] held by both worker and capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom [*Freiheitsillusionen*], all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.<sup>40</sup>

On the basis of this passage, in my view, it is clear that Marx believes that both workers and capitalists believe, necessarily, that capitalism is just; that, for the same reason, they suffer from (unspecified) "mystifications"; that they believe, necessarily but also *falsely* that capitalism embodies the value of freedom (they are subject to "*Freiheitsillusionen*"). It is hardly plausible in this context to think that Marx thinks that (unlike their belief that capitalism is free) the citizens' belief that capitalism is just is *true*. The interpretation argued for shows how it can be possible both that Marx should believe that capitalism is unjust (and that he believes that he so believes) and, at the same time, that he believes that the standard that makes capitalism unjust suffers from limitations as a result of the mode of production of which it is a product, limitations which make justice unsuitable to function as a trans-historical standard by which the ethical worth of societies may finally be assessed.

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<sup>39</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 680.

<sup>40</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 680.