

If Historical Materialism is True Does Morality Totter?*

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I

Friedrich Engels in his graveside speech at Karl Marx's funeral in 1883 depicted Marx in a dual role as a revolutionist and as a man of science. Both of these roles were of fundamental importance for Marx, both are distinct though still interwoven in a complex way, and in both Marx made fundamental contributions. Speaking of him as a revolutionist, Engels remarks:

For Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation.¹

But Engels also sees Marx as a man of science, though as someone who also saw science as 'a historically dynamic revolutionary force'.² He speaks of Marx's 'historical science'. And he thinks of him, in science, as making a Copernican turn in two related spheres that have come to be called *historical materialism* and the *labour theory of value*. Engels describes the former thus: 'Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history . . .'.³ That 'law' rests, or so a plausible gloss on Engels' claim goes, on the historical fact that throughout history there has been a tendency for human beings to develop their productive forces (their means of production and their productive faculties).⁴ These developing productive forces (*Produktivkräfte*) determine (condition) the production relations of a society, the totality of which constitutes its

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1 Fredrick Engels, 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx' (1883), in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., New York 1978, p. 682.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 681.

4 This type of argument is developed in detail and with care in G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Oxford 1978; and in W. H. Shaw, *Marx's Theory of History*, Stanford 1978. For a perceptive critique of Cohen and a significant statement of an alternative model see Richard Miller, 'Productive Forces and Forces of Change', *The Philosophical Review*, 90, 1981, 91-117.

economic structure, and this economic structure in turn determines *the general character* of the state, its legal institutions, its religions and the dominant political, religious, philosophical and moral conceptions and practices. At time t^1 the general character of the state, its legal institutions and the ruling ideas about government, religion, morality and philosophy have the general character they do because they match with, correspond to, the economic structure at that time. As Engels put it himself in his speech at Marx's graveside, 'the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, arts, and even ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved . . .'.⁵ Fundamental social change occurs either because the forces or production develop over time or there develop, over time, conflicts internal to the mode of production. While at a given time the forces of production and the relations of production may be perfectly suited for each other, at a later time, after these forces of production have evolved, they will no longer be in such a match and indeed in time the relations of production—the economic structure—will fetter the forces of production, i.e., prevent them from functioning optimally. At that time society begins to be destabilized and we enter the period of social revolution.

II

If this picture is accepted or some rational reconstruction bearing some family resemblance to it is accepted, it is perhaps natural to believe that morality must simply be ideology and nothing else. There can be no question of justifying any moral conceptions, socialist or otherwise; there can be no 'their morality and ours' and no justification of a socialist morality or any other morality. There cannot possibly be a justified moral theory or normative political theory; and to speak, as E. P. Thompson does, of a disciplined socialist moral critique, or, as some others have, of communist principles of justice or, as Douglas Kellner does, of Marx's moral critique of capitalism, must be a confusion.⁶ There can be moral ideology—something which sometimes may be a useful instrument in class warfare—but no genuine morality or moral critique. A consistent Marxist is a Marxist anti-moralist.⁷ If historical

5 Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 681.

6 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, New York 1978, pp. 171-81; and Douglas Kellner, 'Marxism, Morality and Ideology', in Kai Nielsen and Steven Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, Guelph 1981, pp. 93-126.

7 Anthony Skillen, *Ruling Illusions: Philosophy and the Social Order*, Brighton 1977; Skillen, 'Workers' Interest and the Proletarian Ethic: Conflicting Strains in Marxian Anti-Moralism', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 155-70; Andrew Collier, 'Truth and Practice', *Radical Philosophy*, 5, 1973, 9-16; and Collier, 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 121-54.

materialism is true, and if Marx's conception of ideology is a coherent one, there can be no moral truth or moral objectivity.

William Shaw, in his 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', powerfully and clearly contests these claims, specifically challenging the claim that the very idea of moral objectivity is incompatible with the truth of historical materialism.⁸ His article is careful and informed. I shall begin my discussion of these issues by examining some crucial portions of it.

Shaw starts by pointing out that within Marxist theory there is a *sociology of morals* and that it is integrally linked with historical materialism.

Historical materialism tenders a sociological theory of morality. According to it, different types of society are characterized by different and distinctive moral codes, values, and norms, and these moral systems change as the societies with which they are linked evolve. Morality is not something immutable and eternal; rather, it is part of 'the general process of social, political and intellectual life'—part of the social consciousness—which is conditioned by the general mode of production of material life. It is no accident, but rather a functional requirement, that different forms of moral consciousness accompany different modes of production. Moreover, since all existing societies have been class societies, their moralities have been class moralities in the sense that they sustain and reflect the material relations that constitute the basis of the different forms of class rule. Although the moral outlook of subordinate classes may diverge from that of the ruling class, the perspective of the dominant class tends to prevail throughout society.⁹

It is, I believe, unproblematic that Marx and Engels had such a conception of the sociology of morals. What is not unproblematic is the details of such a conception, the details of its supporting argument or its plausibility. That is tied up with the assessment of historical materialism itself, something which Shaw does not undertake in 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', though he does in his *Marx's Theory of History*.¹⁰ Rather, he is concerned instead 'with the question of whether the historical materialist view of morality is compatible with Marxists claiming validity for their own value judgments'.¹¹

Shaw agrees with Andrew Collier and Anthony Skillen that Marx did not see himself 'as offering a distinctively ethical critique of capitalism or as furnishing primarily a moral case for socialism'.¹² It is, however, true enough, as Douglas Kellner remarks, that Marx was one of the great denouncers.¹³ Marx surely did not refrain from making moral judge-

8 William Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 19-44.

9 Ibid.

10 See citation in note 4. I have also tried to say something about this in my 'Taking Historical Materialism Seriously', *Dialogue*, 22, 1983, 319-38.

11 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 20.

12 Ibid.

13 Kellner, 'Marxism, Morality and Ideology', p. 96.

ments himself, indeed typically very strong moral judgements; his works are peppered with them, but it does not follow from this that his account of capitalism or his critique of capitalism in his mature works—say from *The German Ideology* on—depends on those moral judgements. Shaw claims, along with Collier and Richard Miller and indeed many others, that they do not; and that claim, to put it minimally, is at least reasonable.¹⁴ Yet it is also true, Marxist nonmoralism notwithstanding, that any reading of *Capital* which fails to see Marx's moral commitment is blind. The book seethes with rage at a socioeconomic system that, having ceased to enjoy any historical justification, continues to escalate the 'misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, (and) mental degradation' suffered by the bulk of the population.¹⁵ In circumstances where the capitalist system runs on after it has lost its historical rationale, Marx turns his bitter sarcasm and contempt at that system. He sees it as a system which 'mutilate(s) the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrades him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroys every remnant of charm in his work and turns it into a hated toil'.¹⁶

I think that it is beyond serious dispute that both Marx and Engels thought, to put it minimally, that 'capitalism produced real evils' and that 'socialism was morally preferable'.¹⁷ But it does not at all follow from this, nor is it in fact even remotely true, to say, as Karl Popper did, in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, that '*Capital* is, in fact, largely a treatise on social ethics'.¹⁸ To hate and condemn capitalism is one thing; to turn one's critique of it into a moral critique is another. In a world dominated by bourgeois ideology Marx wanted his critique of capitalism to be a lasting and an effective one; he wanted it to be a real tool to place in the hands of the working class and their allies in their struggle for emancipation, and, he believed, and not without reason, that, for it to be such a book, it must be through and through scientific. Indeed Marx did say famously in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'.¹⁹ But this is not to say, or to give to understand, that one is to change it without understanding it or that understanding it is unimportant. Marx did not think much of philosophy's capacity to understand anything of substance. In that respect he was like the positivists, but he did think that science gave us such an understanding. And indeed, as science develops, there develops in us, in ever

14 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity'; Collier, 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values'; and Richard Miller, 'Marx and Morality', in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (eds.), *Nomos*, 26, New York 1983, pp. 3-32.

15 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 21.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, Princeton 1950, 1966, p. 199.

19 Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 145.

greater degrees, such an enhanced understanding. (Remember that science develops as a productive force and along with the other productive forces.) Marx took his historical economic science to be a theory of society which provided us with such an understanding—an understanding which he thought was useful to the proletariat in their ongoing class struggle with the bourgeoisie. It is a useful tool, that is, in their struggle to destroy the Capitalist System. But that it was used for that end does not make it *non-wertfrei*.

Marx, as we have seen, has moral views and makes moral judgements, but they are not part of the machinery of Marxist social science. It might, of course, be the case that, though Marx made these judgements and had these moral views, he, and Engels as well, like Edward Westermarck and John Mackie, thought they were subjective. But neither Marx nor Engels ever said that or clearly implied that. And much that they did say and do runs contrary to that. They were perfectly willing, in all sorts of contexts, both practical and theoretical, to make all sorts of moral judgements without the slightest diffidence. Moreover, as Shaw points out, Engels did say boldly in his *Anti-Dühring* that it 'cannot be doubted' that 'there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge...'.²⁰ He is claiming that there has (1) been moral progress and (2) he is perfectly willing to speak of 'moral knowledge'. And Marx, we should recall, went over this book and indicated his agreement with it. Indeed he wrote one chapter of it.

Both Marx and Engels could very well be mistaken here about morality and Westermarck and Mackie might be closer to the mark.²¹ Still, such responses, on the part of Marx and Engels, do give us very strong evidence that they were not themselves subjectivists or, what now would be called noncognitivists. They had confidence in their moral claims—in that plain sense they believed in morals—but they took no meta-ethical positions or any foundational positions in ethics. They neither proceeded like Stevenson or Mackie nor like Rawls or Gewirth. They took no *philosophical* interest at all in morality and it is not at all evident that they should have: that their accounts of society or their revolutionary practice would have improved if they had taken such an interest in morals.

To this it might be responded that, if they had consistently thought through what their doctrines of historical materialism and ideology committed them to, they would have been sceptics after all. Their worked-out intellectual structures, i.e., their accounts of historical materialism and ideology, are incompatible with their belief in moral knowledge or even their 'belief in morals'. So it is incumbent on us to try to ascertain whether historical materialism and moral objectivity are

20 Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, tr. Emile Burns, New York 1939, p. 105.

21 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', pp. 42-44.

compatible conceptions. Our first move should be a little more specifically to find out what it is to be a historical materialist.

III

Shaw argues, as do G. A. Cohen, Allen Wood and John McMurtry, for a 'social-scientific interpretation of historical materialism'—an interpretation that in general would follow the schematic view that we presented at the outset. They think that it is a mistake to see Marx's theory of history or his analysis of capitalism 'as normative theories or as dependent upon certain ethical premises'.²² Shaw, however, rightly enough points out that 'it does not follow from the scientific nature of Marx's work that his adherents are prohibited from ethical discourse'.²³ Yet, it still understandably might be felt that moral utterances (any moral utterance you like) can hardly be objective given what Marx says about historical materialism, superstructure and ideology. Must not morality, given Marx's overall typology, be part of the superstructure and, as such, must it not be ideological? And, if it is ideological, it can hardly be objective or truth-bearing. Shaw will resist this conclusion and will argue, on the contrary, that 'the theory of historical materialism and the Marxist analysis of capitalism lead one to affirm certain moral commitments, rather than to abandon value judgments altogether'.²⁴ Still, the difficulty is to see how this could be, given the truth of historical materialism.

Shaw shows, without too much difficulty, that a Marxist need not endorse any version of *ethical* relativism, namely the doctrine that an action or practice *X* is morally right in society *S* if and only if *X* is permitted (approved) by the conventions of *S* or by the dominant class in *S*. Historical materialism is a thesis about what generates and sustains moral beliefs in a society and the related Marxist doctrine of ideology explains how moral beliefs function in a society. (In that way it is a sociology of morals.) It is probably the case that these doctrines do not commit one to any assertions that so-and-so is right and such-and-such is wrong. But most certainly they do not commit one to saying that because a moral belief is deemed right by the conventions of the society or by the ruling or dominant class in the society that moral belief is therefore right in that society or indeed in any society. At most, it would require the historical materialist to say that if it is so believed to be right by the ruling class of that society, it will generally be believed to be right in that society. But that anthropological observation, that bit of the sociology of morals, is perfectly compatible with denying that it is therefore right in

22 Ibid., p. 22; John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, Princeton 1978; and Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, London 1981.

23 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 22.

24 Ibid.

that society, or with a scepticism about whether we could ever determine what is right or wrong period. Historical materialism is as compatible with ethical scepticism and ethical nihilism as it is with normative ethical relativism.

Moreover, if a Marxist committed himself to ethical relativism, he would have to say that, if society *S* were a capitalist society and action *X* were a revolutionary act designed to overthrow capitalism, he, the Marxist, would have to say that it is wrong to do *X* in society *S*, for *X* is not approved by the conventions of *S* or by its ruling class unless (perhaps) he could show that the production relations in *S* no longer suit the productive forces. But no Marxist need say that. He could, and in my view should, stick to the innocuous and trivial thesis in descriptive ethics that such acts would be generally *believed* to be wrong in society *S* and he could use historical materialism and its correlated theory of ideology to explain why it was so believed to be wrong in society *S*. But this is to assert nothing at all about what is right or wrong, let alone to assert that, if it is generally *believed* to be wrong in society *S*, it is wrong in society *S*. To assert anything like this ethical relativist thesis is entirely contrary to the spirit of Marxism and is not required by historical materialism. Historical materialism sees the dominant moralities in a society as cultural 'legitimizing' and stabilizing devices in that society. They are devices 'functionally required by a given mode of production'.²⁵ But to make such a claim is not to make or imply anything about what is or is not right or claim that what is functionally required by a given mode of production ought to obtain.

IV

It is more difficult to ascertain whether historical materialism requires meta-ethical relativism. It is not an insignificant question to ask, If historical materialism is true, must one, to be consistent and coherent in one's views about values, be a meta-ethical relativist? Meta-ethical relativism is the thesis that there are no objectively sound procedures for justifying one moral code or one set of moral judgements. Two moral codes may be equally 'sound' and two moral claims may be equally 'justified' or 'reasonable'. There is no way of establishing what is 'the true moral code' or 'set of moral beliefs'.²⁶

Shaw considers whether historical materialism commits one to meta-ethical relativism and concludes that it does not. He points out, rightly I believe, at the beginning of his discussion of that issue, that 'meta-ethical relativism is not entailed by normative ethical relativism nor does it commit one to any particular criterion of right and wrong. Rather,

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26; and George E. Panichas, 'Marx's Moral Skepticism', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 45-66.

meta-ethical relativism rules out (or else severely restricts) the objective certification of moral principles'. If meta-ethical relativism is true, it is also trivially true that there can be no objectively sound method of establishing which moral judgements are true or which moral claims are warrantable. If such a state of affairs obtains, there is no method that all rational, properly informed and conceptually sophisticated people must accept for fixing moral belief and there are no general moral principles that all such human beings must just accept if they are to be through and through reasonable. In short, there neither are nor can there be any Archimedean points in morality.

Should we say that historical materialism requires meta-ethical relativism? Shaw discusses three reasons for claiming that historical materialism commits one to meta-ethical relativism and attempts to show that none of them provides us with the basis for a sound argument for such a claim. The reasons are: (1) the extensive diversity of moral standards, (2) their relative appropriateness to a historically determinate mode of production and (3) the causal genesis of moral beliefs.

Shaw believes that Marxism must be committed, with its historical materialism, to a belief in the cultural and historical diversity of moral standards. But, he points out, acceptance of this is not sufficient in itself to establish meta-ethical relativism, for the fact that there are a number of different moral standards does not establish that they are all equally sound. Diversity of procedure and method does not establish that all methods are equally sound.

However, the historical materialist will not only assert a diversity of moral standards and methods, he will also assert that the various moral standards, methods and codes are 'for their respective societies at their respective historical levels functionally appropriate, historically necessary or socio-economically unavoidable'.²⁷ But, if this is a genuine social-scientific thesis, it would be a mistake 'to see it as stating an ethical thesis at all'.²⁸ And this should indicate something to us about how deep the *wertfrei-thesis* concerning social sciences has dug. On such a reading what we are talking about is simply, as a scientific thesis, an empirical thesis, about the genesis and functional role of moral conceptions in different societies. It, by itself, asserts nothing about what is right and wrong or good and bad or what ought or ought not to be done. It asserts, as we have just said, that the 'various moral codes among societies are, for their respective societies at their respective historical levels, functionally appropriate, historically necessary, or socio-economically unavoidable'.²⁹ But this is not to say—though the conceptions are easily confused—that moral standards are *vindicated* if and

27 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 27.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

only if they are functionally appropriate or necessary'.³⁰ That 'meta-ethical thesis' with such an employment of 'vindicated' is not a normatively neutral meta-ethical thesis, but, if actually meta-ethical at all, it is a meta-ethical thesis with a plain normative import. Indeed, since the normative term 'vindicated' occurs in use rather than in mention, and the whole statement makes a first-order moral claim, it is a mistake, I believe, to call it a meta-ethical statement. But historical materialism, as a scientific, empirical theory, could not be asserting any such normative things. Historical materialism shows us how such superstructural phenomena work: how a distinctive superstructure supports such a base. It says nothing about whether such a moral code is or is not vindicated. It only makes a comment about what in a certain historical circumstance is functionally appropriate. There is no good reason, Shaw claims, to believe that historical materialism commits us to such a meta-ethical relativism (if meta-ethical relativism it be) with genuine normative implications, or, for that matter, Shaw believes, to any other version of meta-ethical relativism.

Shaw's argument here does not seem to me to be convincing. He is right about vindication. But trouble begins when we reflect on some other things that Shaw here appears at least to be claiming. It sounds as if Shaw is giving us to understand that meta-ethical relativism here must be read as stating, or at least implying, a *normative* thesis and as such, it is at least arguably something which could not be a part of the corpus of science. But that is absurd and Shaw, in personal correspondence, has made it perfectly clear that that is not what he intended. His thesis—he does not call it a meta-ethical thesis—should be taken instead to be a thesis in the sociology of morals that plainly can be a part of historical materialism. If it is so integrated with historical materialism and if that thesis is itself true, there could—or so it appears—be no ground for asserting a transhistorical or transmode of production justifiable or warrantable set of moral principles or even a single such moral principle. In that way such an empirical thesis, for that is what it would have to be to be a thesis in the sociology of morals, supports a moral claim without entailing it. This thesis is ambiguous in this respect and its logical status is unclear, for it does assert that there can be no objective transcultural method of ethics which can establish itself as the correct or even as the most plausible method of ethics and this appears at least to be incompatible with a belief in moral objectivity.

Historical materialists might be thought to have gone around this meta-ethical or ethical bend, or whatever you want to call it, if they are taken to be claiming that the more historically advanced perspectives, perspectives generated ultimately by the continued development of the productive forces, are, as the more historically advanced perspectives,

30 Ibid.

also the more adequate perspectives—more adequate in at least the plainly relevant sense that the stable adoption of those perspectives will lead to a fuller realization of wants and needs across the whole population. Over time, as the productive relations develop, this comes to a progressive advance in superstructural phenomena including moral phenomena. What we need to recognize here is that contextualism does not commit one to relativism, meta-ethical or otherwise, and it is only contextualism that historical materialism is committed to. But that is perfectly compatible with an objectivist conception of ethics.

However, we must be careful to distinguish, as Max Weber taught us to distinguish, a growing differentiation and complexity, on the one hand, from *moral* development or *moral* progress, on the other.³¹ As Weber has powerfully argued, these are distinct notions. That later forces of production are more complex or more efficient or produce more does not automatically mean that all later relations of production, with their corresponding moral forms, are superior, morally speaking, or in other ways humanly speaking, to the previous moral forms. It is not clear that we have criteria for moral progress or that we would, or even could have, if historical materialism is true. It is not clear that we can simply or at all read moral development off from noting the development of the productive forces. That in a given society the forces of production are more efficient than in a previous society is not in itself sufficient to establish that that society, everything considered, is a better society than the previous productively less efficient society. However, while that is true, it is also true, as we noted in the previous paragraph, that these more technically developed modes of production enable more human beings to more fully and more equitably satisfy their wants and needs and that gives us good reason to believe they are also ethically superior.

V

Be that as it may, let us now turn to Shaw's discussion of the third *prima facie* reason why historical materialism is thought to require meta-ethical relativism. That has to do with its causal account of the origin and strength of moral beliefs. Historical materialism gives us to understand that people come to have the moral beliefs they have because of the distinctive production relations of the societies in which they live. Shaw makes the expected response to such a claim:

An elementary distinction can be drawn between the causes of a person (class, society) holding a certain belief and the evidence for that belief or, alternatively, between the reasons for which one believes and the reasons which justify belief.

31 Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, tr. and ed. by E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch, Glencoe 1949.

A fundamental tenet of Marxist class analysis is that one's class position, one's particular location in a specific type of economic structure, strongly conditions one's outlook, moral and otherwise. But it is a simple truth of logical analysis that the origin of a belief is not relevant to its evaluation as true or false. Thus, there is nothing inconsistent in a Marxist maintaining (say) both that the value judgments of the proletariat are socially determined and that they tend to be more veridical than the judgments of other classes.³²

One might, à la Habermas, Hanson or Miller, be a little more cautious than Shaw about what one claims about the genetic fallacy.³³ Still, Shaw is surely right in stressing that we should distinguish questions concerning how we come to have the beliefs we have from questions concerning what, if anything, justifies them or what rationale these beliefs have. That economic structures strongly condition what moral outlook we come to have, such that we would not have them but for the fact that these economic conditions prevail, does not show that they do not have some independent justification or indeed even some justification *sans phrase*. The fact that they so arose does not, at least in many circumstances, in itself provide any justification at all for them (*pace* Lukacs), but it also does not *eo ipse* invalidate them either. It does not show that they could not be justified. What is more troubling is that, since moral ideals are part of the superstructure and thus—or so it would seem—ideological, they do not seem to admit, on such an account, of any justification.

Shaw shows, I believe, that from the fact that (a) there is in various societies and at different times a diversity of moral standards, (b) that these standards have a distinct historically limited functional appropriateness and (c) that they are what they are because of the economic structure of the society, it is not *entailed* that these beliefs are subjective or are without any objective validity. It is at least logically possible for these three things to obtain and for moral beliefs to have an objective validity. But what Shaw does not show is that there is any good reason to think that, if such conditions obtain, moral beliefs are or are likely to be objective. They could be objective, but it is not unnatural to believe that if the above conditions obtain they are hardly likely to be objective.

This 'relativistic worry' is exacerbated when we remember that historical materialism carries with it an account about base and superstructure and an account of ideology and its functions. The base determines, or at least strongly conditions, the superstructure, and if something is part of the superstructure, it is also—or so at least it would seem—ideological. Moral ideas—all moral ideas—are superstructural and thus

32 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 28.

33 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston 1971; and Richard Miller, 'Marx and Aristotle', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 323-52.

ideological. But an ideology, on Marxist accounts, is something that characteristically mystifies consciousness, distorts our understanding of social reality, reflects distinctive class interests and typically functions to further or at least protect the class interests of the dominant class in that society.

It is clear enough that Marx and Engels see most moral beliefs and all systems of ethics extant in the various class societies over time and cultural space as being ideological in just this way. They see morality (that is, the moralities of the various class societies), along with law, as ideology. Moreover, given historical materialism and its base/superstructure division, it is difficult to see how morality could, on that account, be anything other than ideology. It seems at least impossible, given Marx's conception of historical materialism, with its integral doctrine of ideology, for morality to be anything other than ideology and, if it is ideology, it cannot, given Marx's characterization of ideology, be a system of objectively validated beliefs or even a set of attitudes which have an objective rationale.

VI

Let us see if there are resources within Marxist theory to resolve these difficulties, if indeed they are genuine difficulties. Shaw argues in Section V of his 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity' that, if we attend reasonably closely to Marx's conception of ideology, we can 'distinguish within *the moral realm*—at least in principle—between ideological and nonideological beliefs'.³⁴ If Marx's social theory, his empirical-analytical theory, is approximately correct, that is, if it is a reasonable approximation of the empirical facts, then socialism is preferable to capitalism because a socialist society will have more liberty and will be without the poverty and oppression that a capitalist society has. That is indeed a moral judgement, but it is not a moral judgement which could be sustained if the empirical pictures given of capitalism and socialism by Marxist theory were not approximately true. One litmus paper test, or rather a partial litmus paper test, for whether a belief is ideological is whether, when a person becomes aware of the real reasons for or causes of his holding that belief, he would continue to hold it. An ideological belief on the Marxist account characteristically is a belief which a rational person could not continue to hold once he was aware of the reasons for or causes of his believing it. There are many beliefs we have, where we have not correctly identified either the reasons for or the causes of our having those beliefs, which are beliefs which we would still continue to hold even when we had come correctly to identify the causes of or the reasons for holding them. These beliefs, then, given that they

34 Shaw, 'Marxism and Moral Objectivity', p. 37.

would still be held under such circumstances, are not ideological, socially mystifying beliefs. But where, for normally rational people, the belief rests on ignorance of the real reasons (causes) for holding it, and that belief would *not* survive a dispelling of this ignorance, then, if that belief is also a societal belief and answers to class interests, we have good reason for believing that that societal belief is an ideological one. But there are moral beliefs which, by that perfectly reasonable test, are not ideological. This would, if Marxist empirical theory is approximately correct, be true of the Marxist moral judgement expressed above, i.e., that socialism is morally preferable to capitalism, and it is equally true of such judgements as 'Suffering *per se* is bad' and 'Oppression and denial of liberty *per se* is evil' or 'Respect for human rights is good'. However, it would not be true, if Marxist empirical social theory is correct, of the moral belief that there is a fundamental absolute right to private property in the means of production. If the causal genesis of this belief were exposed and its rationale examined in the light of the facts, in a world where a Marxist empirical representation of the facts was approximately true, that belief would be extinguished just as the moral belief that it is wrong for unmarried people to cohabit would not survive an accurate understanding of the facts. Thus we have some moral beliefs that do not pass the ideological litmus paper test, but we have good reasons for believing that the unproblematic moral beliefs mentioned above, e.g., 'suffering *per se* is bad', can and do pass that litmus paper test and we thus have no good reason for believing them to express false consciousness or to involve a distorted conception of social reality or any social mystification. In what way, to translate this into the concrete, do the truistic moral beliefs that pain is bad and pleasure is good or that health is good and illness is bad express any social mystification?

It might be responded that still on Marx's account all such beliefs are part of the superstructure and thus they *must* be ideological. Perhaps in the light of the above examples, and many others that could easily be elaborated, we should say that being superstructural is a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for being ideological. While all ideological beliefs are superstructural, not all superstructural beliefs are ideological.

To the question as to whether this involves an alteration of Marxist theory, the answer should be that *if* it does, then an alteration is in order. Moreover, if it does involve such an alteration, by making that alteration, nothing of substance would be lost that gave Marxist theory power and plausibility in the first place. At most we would have a lacunae in our typology or categorization. We would not know how to classify some moral beliefs in terms of Marxist theory, though the great bulk of them could, and would, continue to be classified, in a nonarbitrary manner, as ideological.

Someone might respond that while not all moral beliefs are rationalizations expressive of false consciousness, they still are all ideological because, whether they are expressive of false consciousness or not, they are beliefs that serve the interests of one or another of the contending classes—typically the dominant class—while putting themselves forward as serving the interests of the whole of society. But it is far from evident that this is always true of all moral ideas. That pleasure is good, that health is good and that suffering and denial of freedom are bad are not in many contexts expressive or supportive of the interests of any one class. Of course, they can be, and frequently are, part of an overall moral or social theory which is itself ideological. As Nietzsche observed, a stress on freedom is sometimes a part of a slave morality and the great stress on freedom—the stress on individual liberty—in both libertarian and liberal moral theories arguably has a definite ideological function in supporting the capitalist order. Certainly a Marxist would think so. Similar arguments can and have been made about the ideological function of hedonism and utilitarianism. But while the moral beliefs mentioned above have a life in some of those moral theories, they also have a moral life outside them and outside of any definite moral theory. While in some contexts such moral beliefs may very well function ideologically, there is no good reason to believe that they are *per se* ideological and that anyone who has such moral beliefs must hold them or apply them in such a way that they must serve the interests of one of the contending classes and harm the interests of another while purporting to be universally valid moral ideas. Would it not plainly, indeed truistically, be the case that in a classless society pain still would be bad and pleasure good? What class interests *must* such a belief serve and why must it mystify anyone's consciousness or distort his understanding of social reality?

Ideologies, on a Marxist understanding, standardly mystify our understanding of social reality and serve the interests of one of the contending classes while purporting to have universal validity. But, I think, it is plain from what we have said above that not all moral ideas do that. At the very least there is no *a priori* reason why they must. And it does not seem to me to be the case that a Marxist sociology of morals shows that they *all* do or that the reasonable expectation should be that they all do.

There remains, on the Marxist conceptual scheme, the problem of just where to place those moral beliefs which are nonideological. Shaw remarks that though social consciousness selects social existence, it is not, on Marx's own account, necessarily ideological.³⁵ Yet that remains something of a dark saying. Perhaps something of what he has in mind is captured more perspicuously in some distinctive remarks about ideol-

35 Ibid., pp. 36-40.

ogy made by John McMurtry in his *The Structure of Marx's World-View*.³⁶

McMurtry, while making many of the points about ideology we have made above, makes some additional ones that would help to make more perspicuous the difference between ideological moral beliefs and moral ideology on the one hand, and nonideological moral beliefs on the other. McMurtry begins by stressing that in talking of ideology in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels start by linking an ideology to 'men's conceptions of themselves', that is, to 'men's various articulated forms of social self-consciousness—from religious to economic, from moral and aesthetic to legal-political'.³⁷ So characterized, it is important to recognize—and indeed it is not something which is generally recognized—that, on Marx's account, it is not the case that 'all ideas or beliefs as such' are going to count as 'ideological' 'but only special superstructural conceptions of human matters or affairs from one or another perspective . . .'.³⁸ McMurtry also stresses how Marx's conception of ideology is linked to 'our everyday concept of rationalization . . .'.³⁹ But he goes on to point out that we must also see an ideology as a *collective* theory. The 'articulation and referent of such rationalization is social rather than "private" . . .'.⁴⁰ Ideologies are 'public conceptions that men have about themselves . . .'.⁴¹ It is important to recognize, McMurtry claims, that, for Marx, for beliefs to count as 'ideological', they must be social mystifications and thus, to get a nonvacuous contrast, they must contrast with beliefs that are not social mystifications. Moreover, these ideologies, these public conceptions of ourselves, are not to be taken as referring to an 'all-inclusive range of cognitive phenomena'.⁴²

Many commentators have so globally conceived of Marx's concept of ideology or they have thought it covered all cognitive phenomena other than science and so have found themselves forced to conclude that for Marx all moral ideas or beliefs *must* be ideological. But that, McMurtry argues, is to give 'ideology' a wider referent than it actually has on Marx's own use. This does not mean that ideology is not a very pervasive sociohistorical phenomena in all societies that we so far have known. We need to recognize, as McMurtry well puts it, 'ideology's existence as the body of public self-consciousness to which most or all other forms of cognition—including private—are likely to conform in

36 McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, pp. 123-44.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

one way or another, because man is a ‘‘social animal’’.⁴³ So understood, Marx, in arguing that ideologies are determined by the economic structure, *should not be read, though sometimes his manner of speech invites this reading, as making the very tendentious epistemological claim that all our ideas and beliefs are determined by the modes of production of our society.* It is not man’s consciousness as such which is so determined but the public self-conceptions extant in society. It is these that are ideological, not all his thoughts and beliefs.

Given this conception, individuals, and perhaps even groups, can have ideas or self-conceptions which are not in the public mode or subject, so plainly and directly, or perhaps not even at all, to state or class control. These ideas are not on Marx’s account ideological. Thus there is conceptual or epistemological space for critical and challenging moral conceptions which are not, in the manner I have characterized above, in the public mode and are not a part of the official currency of public discourse in the society in question. This means that there can be various challenges to the system coming from individuals or groups who have beliefs, including moral beliefs, which are not ideological. There is at least conceptual space on a Marxist account for a critical moral stance—a (in part) morally based critique of moral ideology in an overall situation of class domination. It is not *a priori* impossible that moral ideas could have a liberating role in class struggle. This means that Marx’s social system has found conceptual space for a form of ideology critique practised by Marx and Engels and by socialist anarchists such as Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin.

Such moral beliefs could have such a nonideological status. They might still, of course, without being objective, be nonideological though still thoroughly eccentric and arbitrary beliefs. However, if they were also principles which were impartial, considered (where this is relevant) the interests of everyone alike, would be endorsed behind the veil of ignorance and would be principles that people would also remain committed to once the veil was lifted and with a good understanding of the genesis of their beliefs and in the face of a good knowledge of the relevant facts under vivid recall, then, if the moral beliefs in question were of that sort, we would have some, not inconsiderable, reason for regarding them as having some objectivity, as well as being nonideological.⁴⁴ What is involved here is that assent to a principle will only be objective if assent to it will *not* be withdrawn when the causal history behind that assent is known. This is an important and tolerably practical test for objectivity, though I do not say that by itself it is sufficient to give us objectivity.

43 Ibid., p. 127.

44 Shaw, ‘Marxism and Moral Objectivity’, pp. 36–40.

VII

The recognition that it is at least possible that there are or could be some moral ideas or beliefs, or *perhaps* even moral systems, which are not ideological or ideologies should not be taken to be at all incompatible with Marx's sociology of morals or to at all detract from its force or importance. Marx and Engels, and indeed most Marxists following them, have seen, and not without reason, most morality as ideology. If we look at the general run of moral advocacy, advice or preaching in our society, it is ideological and nicely fitting into the Marxist conception. Even in 'high culture' a lot of the moralizing, perhaps practically all of it, has that function. It is, that is, ideology. Marx also argued that utilitarian, Kantian and various idealistic ethical theories were ideologies and contemporary Marxists have tried to pin that label on libertarian, contractarian, Christian and existentialist accounts of morality. The sociology of moral account, Marxist style, has tried to show, that is, how various popular moral conceptions, theological and philosophical normative ethical theories and indeed even meta-ethical theories, such as Hare's, Foot's and Hampshire's, are ideological or have their various unwitting ideological biases. They have tried to show how such moralities, both popular and theoretical, have, sometimes wittingly but far more typically unwittingly, rationalized a view of how to act or live one's life which serves dominant class interests in various and, in the case of the philosophical accounts, often unobvious and disguised ways.⁴⁵ (It is not that these moral philosophers are being accused of deliberate malpractice. But the claim is that self-deception is deeply at work here.)

For such Marxist accounts to be viable, Marx's account of historical materialism and ideology, or at least his account of ideology and class, must be approximately true. These various Marxist conceptions here must be probed and elucidated and their application to moralities and to moral theories must be examined on a case by case basis. I think it is reasonably evident that Marx was too short with the utilitarians and Feuerbach and some Marxists have been too short with Rawls. But, as George Brenkert and Richard Miller have shown in the utilitarian case, a Marxist account could be articulated which would show utilitarianism to be deeply ideological and not an account that a Marxist should take over

45 See citation in note 8 and see as well Robert Eccleshall, 'Ideology as Common Sense', *Radical Philosophy*, 25, 1980, 2-8; David Murray, 'Utopia or Phantasy?', *Radical Philosophy*, 22, 1979, 21-26; Kai Nielsen, 'Morality, Marxism and the Ideological Function of Morality', *Occasional Review*, 8-9, 1978, 165-82; Richard Norman, 'Moral Philosophy Without Morality', *Radical Philosophy*, 6, 1973, 1-8; and Trevor Pateman, 'Liberals, Fanatics and Moral Philosophy: Aspects of R. M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*', *Radical Philosophy*, 10, 1975, 26-27.

and use as the 'ethical foundation' of Marxism, even if, what is surely not at all evident, there is any need for such a foundationalist account.⁴⁶

VIII

Let us, to bring this to a close, review what is most troublesome about historical materialism and ethics. We should start by reminding ourselves that it does not make sense to say we ought to do something unless we can do it. If a people could not at a particular time do other than what in fact they do, then it hardly makes sense to say either that they ought to do that thing or that they ought to do something else instead. Yet the sociology of morals historical materialism tenders, says, in effect, that the dominant moral views of an epoch will be determined or at least strongly conditioned by the mode of production of that epoch. The moral views that are the pervasive ones in a society, where that society is in a condition that for a reasonably determinate time is stable, will be the moral views that are functionally appropriate for the reigning mode of production of that epoch. This means that the dominant moral views will have predictably determinate features that are quite distinct from any considerations concerning their validity and distinct from considerations turning on questions concerning what would be chosen by fully informed, reflective individuals under conditions of undistorted communication. It would seem to be the case that for most people in any class society during any period of considerable social stability there would, as a matter of fact, be little question of their choosing and rationally assessing the moral views they have. The moral views they have are the moral views that are functionally appropriate to the reigning modes of production in their society.

This appears at least to undermine the very possibility of morality, for belief in morals appears at least to be a violation of the 'ought implies can' maxim. A response to this, which taken by itself is indeed a weak one, will still have force when taken in conjunction with some other considerations. That response is this: that most people will have their ethical views so settled for them does not entail that all will. It does not entail that there cannot be such a thing as critical moral reflection. And, as we have seen, neither Marx nor Engels thought that it did.

Still, it will in turn be responded, in making moral judgements about what a society should be like, that if the moral views in the society are as determinate as historical materialism gives to understand, then we can hardly reasonably make moral assessments about how that society at a given time ought or ought not to be.

46 G.G. Brenkert, 'Marx's Critique of Utilitarianism', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 193-220; and Richard Miller, 'Marx and Aristotle', in Nielsen and Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality*, pp. 323-52.

In a way that is fair enough but it needs clarification and when that is carried through we can come to see how historical materialism does not require morality to totter. If, on the one hand, to say that we cannot reasonably make moral assessments about how a society at a given time ought or ought not to be, means that we cannot reasonably assert, where for a time no change is possible, that a society ought to have moral practices and institutions which it cannot have, then that reply is well taken. If, on the other hand, it is taken to mean that no one in the society can see how the modes of production could in time change and indeed ought to change, because with that change a better life for people could obtain, though at that time such a change is not on, then the claim that we can make, and should make, no moral assessments of society or can or should have no moral vision of what society should become, if historical materialism is true, is plainly false. The reach of some people can go beyond their grasp. They can have a coherent moral vision of how things ought to be even if at that time that state of affairs is not achievable.

Historical materialism does not create a form of conceptual imprisonment in which such moral visions are impossible. Whether they are an irresponsible, harmful utopianism depends entirely on what is done with them. We will not change the world by becoming clearer about what morality requires of us or what the design of a good society would look like. But where some of us, as we can, can have some enhanced understanding of what a better society would be like, this can help us better focus the direction of our struggle. Far from rendering this nugatory, historical materialism can help us tie these struggles to the world.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Ronald Bayer, Arthur Caplan, Jerry Cohen, Frank Cunningham, Thomas Murray, Peter Rossel, Bruce Jennings, William Shaw and Robert Ware for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.