

## MARXISM AND THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW

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**M**ARXISTS, I shall argue, are best understood not as rejecting morality *per se*, jettisoning moral belief *holus bolus*, but as rejecting something which indeed is very pervasive in class societies, namely moral ideology, i.e., those false moral conceptions which have the appearance of universality but in reality only answer to the interests of a determinate class.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this, Marx has been read as an immoralist: "as a critic or opponent of morality, and not merely of false moral ideas but of all morality."<sup>2</sup> Marx's writings are indeed filled with bitter denunciations of capitalism and with praise for the radical working class movement and for those whom he regards as its legitimate representatives. These criticisms by Marx of the capitalist order are biting and not infrequently unequivocal. Yet it is not clear what normative or evaluative assumptions or conceptions are behind this clearly normative critique. On what does Marx base this aspect of his critique of capitalism and his advocacy of socialism?

It is unclear what his underlying rationale is here, but it is clear that Marx did have contempt for moral theorizing, and it appears that he was even hostile to morality itself. Given that Marx himself, in all sorts of contexts (including in private correspondence) was quite prepared—without the slightest hesitation or ambivalence—to make firm moral judgments, is it not more plausible (*pace* the immoralist reading) to believe that Marx was not rejecting morality but only its false coinage in the *moralism* of moral ideology—an ideology which does its subterranean work in the oppression of the working class, the peasantry and the like? The very passion of Marx's denunciation of morality is explained by the moralist's hatred and contempt for the misuse of genuine morality in a moral *ideology* which serves repressive ruling class interests.

It could, however, be responded that matters run much deeper than that. Notions like justice and

rights (the very concepts themselves) cannot, consistently with what is canonical in Marxist theory, have the kind of transhistorical validity that most people, including most philosophers, believe they have. Put differently, if Marxist theory is correct, claims of justice and rights cannot have any transhistorical validity. Indeed, the response might run, on a consistent Marxist account justice and rights claims cannot have any critical rational force at all. They only have, and can only have, a sociological juridical reality. What is right or what is just is mode-of-production relative. Conceptions of rights or of justice are superstructural notions dependent on the mode of production of the time. What is just—and not merely what is *thought* to be just—is what helps facilitate or stabilize the dominant mode of production of the time, and what rights we have and indeed what conceptions we have of them and what weight we give to conflicting rights is similarly functional for the dominant mode of production. Where for a time the class struggle is intense and where there is no dominant mode of production, there are and can be no accepted, culturally speaking authoritative, standards of justice or of rights. These notions in such circumstances will at best be essentially contested concepts. There is no reality they can answer to. To talk, in criticizing capitalism, of violations of the rights of workers is to substitute verbal mystification for a scientific analysis of the worker's situation and prospects. Such moralizing has no genuine emancipatory force. What is needed instead are scientific analyses, both abstract ones and concrete ones, analyses which will enable the working class to know who they are and what their class interests are, who they were and who they might become. It is this and not moral philosophy, analysis of moral conceptions or moralizing that they need, particularly when the reality of moral beliefs is mode-of-production dependent and has no transhistorical or critical reality, i.e., there is no, as J. L.

Mackie would put it, objective prescriptivity to them.<sup>3</sup> People mistakenly believe in morals. That is, they believe in some objective transhistorical reality that moral notions answer to, but that belief rests on a mistake—for there is no such transhistorical moral reality. If we have a good scientific understanding, an understanding that historical materialism and a Marxist theory of classes will arguably give us, we will come to see that there can be no rational Archimedean point which will enable us to assess societies and say which are just and which are unjust, or what are the inalienable rights of human beings anywhere and at any time, or what the good life for a human being is. As Allen Wood puts it, “According to *The German Ideology*, the discovery by historical materialism of the connection between moral ideology and material class interests has ‘broken the staff of all morality’ whatever the content of that morality might be.” (p. 682) Morality, all morality, “and not just bourgeois ideology about morality,” has, he maintains, been scientifically and rationally described and analyzed in such a way that anyone who understands what is going on will come to see that believing in morals is rationally on a par with believing in God, where it is clear enough that God is some sort of reified human projection. Neither God nor morality can be what their faithful take them to be. Neither answers, nor can answer, to any objective reality. Both belief in God and belief in morals rest on illusions.

## II

I do not mean to deny that Marx sometimes thought e thought something like that—that is to say, he sometimes had some such metabelief—and I do not mean to deny that some acute philosophers, both Marxist and non-Marxist, have thought something like that as well.<sup>4</sup> What I do want to query is whether there is anything canonical in Marxism that commits us to anything like this. I want to ask whether, when we take what is distinctive and central to Marxist social theory, we find anything which commits us to a rejection of morality.

It is sometimes believed that the destruction of the foundations of morality, or indeed of any reasonable rationale for believing in morals, is one

of the achievements of historical materialism. That is to say, if historical materialism is a correct scientific account of epochal social change then morality can have no rational foundation. One way the argument could go is like this: historical materialism (the materialist conception of history) requires that all moral beliefs and conceptions be ideological, be beliefs and conceptions which, wittingly or unwittingly, represent, or at least answer to, class interests, while, through the distorting lens of ideology, they are represented in class ideology (a pleonasm) as answering to the interests of everyone alike in an evenhanded way. Morality, moral ideology and ideological conceptions are necessarily conceptions which distort our understanding of ourselves and our class situation in the interests of the hegemony of some class. They are not conceptions which will help liberate us from oppression, but which help to continue to shackle us to that very oppression. Historical materialism and a Marxist theory of ideology show us why moral ideas can answer to nothing objective and why they are, and must be, merely vehicles of class interests, typically of dominant class interests.

Historical materialism and a Marxist theory of ideology, I shall now argue, do not establish any such thing. These Marxist conceptions in effect tender a sociology of morals.<sup>5</sup> They show us, if they are approximately correct conceptions themselves, how morality *typically* functions in class society, how moral notions massively and pervasively affect people’s lives in class society: they show us, by exposing its typical social role, the dark oppressive underside of morality in our lives in class societies. It is the analogue in the public domain of what Freud, another stern critic of moralism, shows in the domain of so-called private morality. But this Marxist sociology of morals, derived from historical materialism and from a Marxist conception of ideology, is not even implicitly an epistemology or a meta-ethic. It requires no epistemology of ethics or a meta-ethic, let alone an error theorist meta-ethic such as Edward Westermarck’s or J. L. Mackie’s or some other subjectivist account. Such a subjectivist view is plainly in conflict with moral realism and quasi-moral realism. But historical materialism is neutral with respect to these arcane disputes. It enjoins neither subjectivism, moral realism, quasi-moral realism, anti-moral realism or anti-anti-moral realism.

Moral ideas are of course a part of the superstructure (and trivially so) if historical materialism is true, but from this it does not follow that moral ideas must be ideological—for while all ideological conceptions are superstructural not all superstructural conceptions are ideological. If they were, then all ideas, including many if not all of Marx's own ideas, would be ideological and Marx would have hoisted himself by his own petard. However, principles of interpretive charity will hardly allow that, particularly if we can find an equally plausible reading which does not require it. A refusal to identify superstructural and ideological notions does just that and has a solid textual base as well. However, even if it did not have such a textual base, there is no reason why contemporary Marxists should not draw this distinction in the superstructure between ideological beliefs and non-ideological superstructural beliefs.<sup>6</sup> It allows them to go on saying what, surely, a Marxist understanding of the sociology of morals and ideology requires, namely that morality is *ideology-prone*—but it does not require the stronger claim that all moral ideas, because they are superstructural, *must* be ideological or that they must be ideological *sans phrase*.

This saves the phenomena. We can see why Marxists have rightly said, as a remark in the sociology of morals, that morality is ideology, while also allowing Marx and Engels and others coherently to condemn capitalism as oppressive and dehumanizing while simultaneously speaking (as they do from time to time, particularly in private correspondence) of what common human decency requires, what their socialist duty requires, and what the contours of a truly human society would look like.

### III

Even if my above suggestion is not followed and we do not distinguish between superstructural considerations and ideological ones (as one species of superstructural considerations), a good understanding of ideology would give us a consistent and non-pejorative way to speak, as Lenin and Trotsky did, of a socialist ideology. That way of reading ideology will make the mark (the determining criterion) of the ideological that of

answering to class interests, rather than ideology being something which *must* distort our understanding of social reality whenever we are under its spell. A “nonclass ideology,” on such a conception, is a contradiction in terms. Marxists can, and I believe should, by what is in effect a theory-justified stipulative definition (a reformative definition, if you will), define “an ideology” as a cluster of beliefs, conceptions or practices which function, or at least purport to function, to serve the interests of a class or sometimes of several classes. On that conception there can be dominant class ideologies and challenging class ideologies. It is important to recognize, I repeat, that on this reading of ideology the mark of the ideological is that *an ideology answers to class interests* not that it distorts our understanding of social reality. Ideologies *typically* distort, but not necessarily or invariably so, and not simply because of what an ideology must be.

This conceptualization, while squaring well with Marxist texts, has a number of other distinct advantages. It does not set Lenin, with his talk of “socialist ideology,” in conflict with Marx and it does not make an ideology something that must, in however disguised or elliptical a way, be a form of propaganda distorting our understanding of ourselves and our world. Nor does it set science and ideology on a collision course by making it the case that if a belief is ideological it could not be a true scientific belief. An ideological belief need not distort and the fact that it answers to class interests need not make it unscientific. Some of Keynes's economic theories could have served capitalist interests, and no doubt did. Still, for all that, they could have been correct or partially correct scientific accounts, or at least genuinely scientific accounts. Marx certainly thought his economic doctrines in *Capital* were true scientific accounts, and yet he also believed they plainly served proletarian interests. Moreover (to state the obvious), the fact that they did so was extremely important to him. Somewhat parallel things can be said of morality. The moral belief “Capitalism robs the workers” could serve the interests of the working class and thus be a bit of working class ideology, yet still be a justified moral belief—justifiable, that is, from a disinterested point of view.

However, if we read the Marxist slogan “Mor-

ality is ideology” as saying that all morality must be ideological as all cats must be feline, then, even on the above reading of “ideology,” we make Marxists say something that, to put it charitably, is implausible. This would make it impossible in the future communist society for there to be moral relations between human beings. Morality would simply drop out in a classless society. Marx, in his wilder utopian fantasies, does talk of morality, along with law, disappearing in the future communist society.<sup>7</sup> But Jon Elster is surely right in saying that in a perfectly Marxist sense that is bad utopianism.<sup>8</sup> We will never have such abundance that people will be able to just take whatever it is that they need. And, while it is predictable that in the future communist society conflicts between people will be fewer and people will no longer be so prone to go in such self-interested directions, there still will be some conflict of interests between people. Couples will sometimes split up and they will both want the child or the dog for the preponderance of the time, and there will be situations where, between two thoroughly competent persons, both cannot get the chair in Micronesian Studies at the same university at the same time. In fine, sometimes—though not so pervasively and no longer across class lines—people will be at cross purposes with each other over matters they really care about where their interests conflict. Moreover, no matter how altruistic they may turn out to be, they will still need some impartial device to adjudicate those conflicts of interests—and this is one of the fundamental reasons for which we have morality and law. In a classless and stateless society there would be fewer such conflicts, but it is totally unrealistic not to believe that some will remain. We would, even with the withering away of the state, need some state-like devices for law and, even if we could dispense with law, we would still need morality to adjudicate such conflicts impartially. Imaginative alterations of elements in the situation could rid us of some conflicts of interest. We might, for a conveniently easy example, have two chairs at the same place at the same time in Micronesian Studies. But some conflicts, it is safe to predict, would remain in any society and we need morality, or law backed up by morality, to adjudicate those conflicts fairly.

We must take care that we do not so characterize ideology and morality that we end up, given our conception of what ideology is, making it logically (conceptually) impossible for there to be morality in a classless society, where there will be extensive clarity in the social relations. To claim there can be no morality in a classless society is, for the above reasons, absurd. We should not want to gerrymander our ways of talking and conceiving so that we make it impossible to speak of there being some morality in a classless society. To do so is merely to play with words. We can, to understate it, with every bit as much fidelity to the core conceptions of Marxism, give a sociological reading to the claim that morality is ideology rather than the epistemological reading which would make it parallel to the claim that cats are feline. This sociological reading makes sense of Marx and Marxism. It obviates what would otherwise be paradoxes and it fits with the Marxist core. It does indeed conflict with Marx’s remarks about morality coming to an end in a classless society, but that is (a) not even remotely a part of the Marxist core or entailed by that core and (b) is in itself wildly implausible.

#### IV

There is a further argument for Marxist immoralism against the thesis I am maintaining, which I shall now consider. This argument has been given a powerful articulation by Allen Wood. It is an articulation which both maintains that such a rejection of morality is required by core elements in Marx’s theory and that it has on its own a certain persuasiveness.<sup>9</sup> Wood, to bring out what is involved in this, sees “Marx’s immoralism as a repudiation of moral values in favour of certain nonmoral ones . . .”<sup>10</sup> He thinks, not implausibly, that Marx “derived his conception of morality from Hegel, but modified it in certain ways in accordance with his materialist theory of history.” (p. 686) It is, in turn, important to see that Hegel’s conception was a deep repudiation of the tradition in moral philosophy coming down to us from the utilitarians and from Kant. If we combine it with historical materialism, Wood claims, we will gain a plausible rationale for Marx’s immoralism. As Wood puts it,

I think that someone who held a basically Hegelian conception of morality and its role in human life together with a Marxian materialist conception of history and a Marxian preoccupation with freedom and rational transparency in social relationships might have quite strong reservations about morality, strong enough to motivate the anti-moral pronouncements we find in Marx's writings. (p. 686)

In contrast, to Mill and Kant, and indeed to the tradition in moral philosophy, Hegel believed there were two complimentary concepts of morality, not one. For Hegel there was morality as *Moralität* and, in contrast, morality as *Sittlichkeit*. *Moralität*, as Wood nicely puts it, "is the reflective attitude of an active agent seeking to actualize the idea of autonomy or subjective freedom."<sup>11</sup> By contrast, "*Sittlichkeit* is the set of institutions and objective norms, sanctioned by custom, through which the members of a living and rational social order fulfill the demands of the social whole to which they belong."<sup>12</sup> In Hegel's theory *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* are importantly and closely interrelated though *Moralität* is parasitic on *Sittlichkeit* in important ways. The parasitic side is this: without the customary morality of *Sittlichkeit*, "derived from the social order, the conscientious individual self would have no content, no specific duties through which to express itself."<sup>13</sup> Morality as *Sittlichkeit* provides *the actual content of the moral order* since its norms represent to individuals what Hegel calls a rational or universal life and interest. Moreover, without this social order the individual would be rudderless and "doomed to impotence and frustration in its attempts to realize the moral good."<sup>14</sup> The achievement of individual autonomy, for Hegel, "consists precisely [*sic*] in the actualization of the universal by the individual." (p. 686)

However, the relation of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* is not entirely parasitical. As societies move toward the Enlightenment, an element of reciprocity between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* grows steadily stronger. To be rational in form *Sittlichkeit* needs *Moralität*. As we move towards the Enlightenment, individuals in such cultures begin to see themselves as autonomous and they begin to demand that what they, as individuals, will—or at least will in a universalizable way—be seen by their culture, indeed by the whole social

world, as good. *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* come, for Hegel, to fit like hand and glove. As Wood puts it, "For Hegel . . . the norms of morality are the demands a social order makes on individuals in order to sustain its life and impose its rational form on the world. And these norms have rational validity for the individual because their fulfillment enables the individual self to attain rational autonomy and self mastery." (p. 686)

How would someone who started with this Hegelian conception of morality (as Marx presumably did), come to see morality once she accepted what I have called the Marxist core set of beliefs and most particularly once she had come to accept historical materialism? Wood's answer comes out in the following crucial passage:

Let us now try to imagine how morality, conceived along Hegelian lines, ought to strike a Marxian historical materialist. A historical materialist conceives of a social order not as a form of spirit but as a form of commerce or mode of production. For nearly the whole of past social history, moreover, society has been divided into hostile classes whose interests are fundamentally divided by relations of oppression or exploitation. If objective moral norms represent the demands of the current social order, then most fundamentally they represent the economic needs of the prevailing mode of production. They enjoin conduct from each individual which corresponds to that mode, which is harmonious or foundational in relation to it. Thereby, they enjoin from each individual the behavior which is on the whole advantageous to the ruling and exploiting classes within the society. Thus if the Hegelian conception of morality as *Sittlichkeit* is correct, then the *Sittlichkeit* of bourgeois society will indeed be what *The Communist Manifesto* says it is, merely bourgeois prejudices masking bourgeois interests. (p. 687)

Whatever Marx may or may not have believed here—and Wood recognizes that our claims must remain speculative, for we have no texts to seize on here—a Marxist, starting from the Marxist core, need not accept such a Hegelian account of ethics. She can, and in my view should, recognize that Hegel was gesturing at something important with his distinction between morality as *Sittlichkeit* and as *Moralität*, but she need not accept Hegel's rationalist and politically naive rendering of

*Sittlichkeit*. *Sittlichkeit*, as we have seen, is conceived by Hegel as “the set of institutions and objective norms, sanctioned by custom, through which the members of a living and rational social order fulfill the demands of the social whole to which they belong.” (p. 686) But a Marxist or, for that matter, a non-Marxist empiricist, might simply excise the rationalistic elements in Hegel’s conception of *Sittlichkeit* (remember it is not meant to be a term of art) and keep what at least is arguably insightful in the concept. What we need to do is to excise the phrases “objective norms” and “rational” from the above characterization and then, by making some realistic substitutions, we will gain a far less tendentious characterization of *Sittlichkeit*. The demythologized characterization reads: “*Sittlichkeit* is the set of institutions and (culturally speaking) deeply embedded norms, sanctioned by custom, through which the members of the social order in question fulfill the demands of the social whole to which they belong.” Without bringing in contentious philosophical claims, or being in any other way tendentious, we have here a less philosophically loaded characterization of *Sittlichkeit* which still brings out its vital social function in society. Indeed, without Hegel’s obscurities about rationality, it tells us something important about the social role of morality.

With such a conception of *Sittlichkeit*, we have a conception of the *sociological* foundations of morality. The historical materialist, starting with such a conception of *Sittlichkeit*, does not need to say anything about the *necessity* of there being a belief in objective rational moral norms, which Marxists then proceed to expose as illusory. The historical materialist need not say—and indeed, given his sociology, should not say—that the social order recognized by *Sittlichkeit* is to be regarded as a rational social order, which Marxists in turn, continuing with their ideology critique, expose as an irrational, repressive and dehumanizing social order. It depends on the society whether it is such an irrational social order, whether it is a class society and if so, which class has control and how this control works. In a workers’ controlled society in the early stages of socialism, the society would still be a class society and there would be in it a distinctive *Sittlichkeit*. Hopefully, however, it would not be an irrational *Sittlichkeit*.

I have given a more neutral characterization of *Sittlichkeit* than Hegel’s. It is the kind of *Sittlichkeit* that would have to be present in any social order, including a classless society. In my more neutral characterization, morality as *Sittlichkeit* need not make such Hegelian claims to validity, though Marxists will point out that in class divided societies, prior to the advent of socialism, the dominant ideologies of the society will be such that most people will be mystified into believing something that at least bears a family resemblance to what Hegel believed, namely that the set of institutions to which they are heirs are the objective norms of a living rational order. It will generally be believed that, in some mysterious way, they have objective prescriptivity. There is probably going to be this kind of believing in morals by most people in any social order, or at least in any society prior to a thoroughly developed classless society where social relations are far more transparent than they are now. Marxists, deploying their sociological conception of how moralities function in society, will expose this Hegelian talk about a rational social order and objective norms as ideology. Moreover, it is ideology that, in the typical situation, and most surely in bourgeois societies, obfuscates. Marxists will show how bowdlerized conceptions of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* will get infused into people’s thinking about how their morality—here plainly a moral ideology—functions in class societies. But classless societies—even classless societies on the communist end of the transition—would still, it is plausible to believe, have a *Sittlichkeit*, though in thinking through what this would be it is important to keep in mind the demythologized, philosophically unfreighted sociological characterization I have given it. Morality, while no longer being moral ideology, could in this way, remain perfectly intact in a classless society. As individuals thinking morally in a classless society, we would still start, as always and unavoidably, from morality as *Sittlichkeit*. We would start from our (culturally speaking) deeply embedded norms and our corresponding set of interlocked institutions. These norms are what John Rawls characterized as our firmest considered judgments.<sup>15</sup> Now, starting with them and then turning a Rawlsian trick by utilizing a coherentist model of justification and rationaliza-

tion, we would seek to get them into *wide* reflective equilibrium. In our reasoning from such a *Sittlichkeit*, this would involve a good measure of winnowing out of such culturally received norms. Moreover, because it is *wide* reflective equilibrium we are seeking we will appeal not only to the abstract moral principles emerging out of *Moralität* in its reciprocal relations with *Sittlichkeit*, but to the very best social theories we have as well (empirical-cum-theoretical theories which are both descriptive-explanatory and interpretive).<sup>16</sup> If the Marxist core social theory is correct, these will be largely Marxist theories. Utilizing the method of wide reflective equilibrium, we will shuttle back and forth between those three elements until, for a time, we gain a coherent package of beliefs and principles. Rawls calls this a stable equilibrium, though it is an equilibrium which will no doubt require us to modify and in some instances weed out norms from the cluster of deeply embedded norms culturally inherited from our *Sittlichkeit*. We will also have to either abandon or reshape some of our abstract norms (typically more individually concocted). Sometimes at least, we will have to devise new ones. In the doing of these things, we will, not infrequently, have to put new questions to social theory and perhaps in various ways modify that social theory where the elements involved are not sufficiently firmly established to be plausible candidates for being regarded as facts of the matter.

This coherentism of wide reflective equilibrium will, in turn, give us a demythologized sense of the way in which morality could come, in the distinctive constructivist sense John Rawls speaks of, to have an objective justification. With such a justification its norms could be said, though in a thoroughly fallibilistic spirit, to be rational and objectively valid, though here objectivity would come to a certain kind of intersubjectivity resting on the consensus attained in wide reflective equilibrium.<sup>17</sup> Recall that here we are talking about what morality could come to, and predictably would come to, if Marx's political sociology is near to the mark, in a classless society. By contrast morality, as the above long quotation from Wood brings out, would remain ideology, or largely ideology, in class divided societies which were not even on their way to becoming classless societies.

Starting with a streamlined Hegelian conception of morality, we have shown (a) what it would be like in a classless society to have a non-ideological morality and (b) how, as things stand in class divided societies, morality is going to be very largely ideological in the pejorative ways in which Marxists characteristically speak of it. In a classless society, as in any society, morality gets much of its content from the customary norms—the shared considered judgments of the society. Without such a cluster of norms, individuals would not be recognizably human, let alone capable of achieving rational autonomy (rational self-direction). But, as *Moralität* recognizes and as would be fully recognized in classless societies, this is not all rational autonomy and self-mastery come to. Morality is not just our station and its duties. What finally would obtain, with material abundance, would be a mode of production committed to producing to satisfy needs, and to achieving a society no longer divided into classes with antagonistic interests, where a dominant class oppresses and exploits a weaker class. We would at least have achieved material conditions propitious for obtaining autonomy and self-mastery (if they do not come to the same thing). And in such circumstances some individuals will successfully avail themselves of the conditions culturally in place for attaining such autonomy, and indeed in some instances will actually attain it—or some approximation thereof—thus making universal human emancipation a real possibility for the first time in history. There would, however, still be some conflicts of interest in the society for the reasons we have already given. Steven Lukes to the contrary notwithstanding, we would not only have a morality of emancipation, a morality as *Sittlichkeit* would remain as well—and that would have, as a proper part, a morality of *Recht*, though it is not unreasonable to expect that that element of morality would become increasingly less prominent.<sup>18</sup>

## V

What I have shown here is how someone starting with historical materialism and the roughly Hegelian understanding of morality Wood adverts to could very plausibly come out with a rejection of

Marxist immoralism (of Marx's immoralism, *if* it was that) and claim instead that in the circumstances of a thoroughly classless society we could, and predictably would (on core Marxist premisses), come to have a non-ideological morality. (Given what ideology is we could not—logically could not—have an *ideological* morality in a classless society.) We could on Marxist premisses draw those conclusions while at the same time remaining firmly wedded to the Marxist sociological thesis that in class societies moral ideology is the order of the day. In class-divided societies only an *appearance* of universal interests is represented by *Sittlichkeit*. What we have here, distorted by ideology, is a false picture of a system of norms answering to universal human interests. But in classless societies, with the clarity of social relations and with the undistorted discourse that would come to obtain for the first time in history, if Marxist social theory is on the mark, it will (if such societies actually come into being) be possible for universal interests to be represented in the *Sittlichkeit* and thus for us to come to have a rational morality that is not an ideology. The demands of morality need no longer be subversive of rationality. Under such circumstances, we could rightly speak of the *Sittlichkeit* of such a society and of its norms roughly as Hegel does and the society in Rawl's sense would be a well-ordered society.

However, this is not to gainsay Wood's powerful and correct point that as a matter of sociological fact morality will and must, in most of its employments, continue to function as a form of ideology in class societies. A lucky few will be able, more or less clearly, to see through it. And it is also not unreasonable to believe that there are some particular moral judgments that are not hobbled by ideological deformation, for example, that friendship carries with it commitments and that friendship between human beings is a precious thing. Indeed some of the moral judgments that dot Marx's and Engels's texts and the texts of other classical Marxists are hopefully examples of non-ideologically distorted moral judgments. But all that notwithstanding, in class societies morality, as a set of social institutions, fundamentally and pervasively works to subvert the self-understanding of those who follow it, whatever their class position.

## VI

In spite of what I have argued above, it might be contended that at best I have established that a consistent Marxist, accepting the canonical core of Marxist social theory, could have a morality of emancipation—but not that he could consistently have a morality of *Recht*. Justice is a purely juridical and ideological notion that will drop out in the communist society of the future. Justice, when applied to economic transactions, is, as Wood argues, a purely functional notion. As Marx put it in *Capital*,

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 content of such transactions] is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it.<sup>19</sup> (pp. 288-89)

To try to use justice as a critical social tool, Marx argues, is worse than useless. It is actually antithetical to class interests, for it tends to pervert the understanding workers have of both their personal interests and their class interests and of the relation between those interests. Instead of helping them clearly to see their situation, it fills their heads with a lot of "obsolete verbal rubbish" about rights and justice.<sup>20</sup> What is important to instill in workers, Marx argues, "is not moral blame directed against the bourgeoisie but rather a clear-sighted recognition that their own interests are deeply opposed to those of the bourgeoisie." (p. 691) On his account, proletarian revolutionaries should be resolute, disillusioned individuals who well understand what class society is like, who know the line of march and the steps to be taken, and who, understanding moral ideology in the way we have explained, know how in capitalist societies law, morality, and religion are nothing more than bourgeois prejudices masking bourgeois interests.<sup>21</sup> Morality generally, and justice in particular, glaringly requires "in principle an equal concern and respect for the interests of all . . ." (p. 693) But, Marx claims, to accept this vantage point of impartiality and disinterestedness—something which is associated with the very taking of the moral point of view—is to fail to



understand the nature of class society. Whatever it may be in intention, morality in the midst of class struggle comes to a selling out of the interests of the proletariat. A well informed proletarian, clearly aware of both his class interests and his individual interests, will not take this disinterested path of justice. He will instead put his class interests first. The thing for him to do is relentlessly and intelligently to struggle to protect and further proletarian class interests and to further “the interests of other classes (such as the peasantry or the petty bourgeoisie) only to the degree that they are temporarily coincident with or incipiently identical to the interests of the proletariat.”<sup>22</sup> Proletarian class interests, in short, are the thing to concentrate on. Militants should not distract themselves with extensive worries about what is just or fair or with trying to take into account, in an impartial and Olympian way, the interests of everyone alike, where each, no matter what her class, is to count for one and none to count for more than one. Rallying around much moralistic positions will only stand in the way of revolution and of human emancipation.

What should be argued in turn is that in such class contexts it would not be unjust or immoral to countenance a differential concern for the interests of different groups if such a concern could be justified by some impartially sustainable general principles of justice or by the greatest good for all. Such a conception could, in the appropriate sense, be quite objective and non-ideological. Thus, for example, compatible with his overall conception of justice as fairness, John Rawls justifies a greater concern, in certain ways and certain circumstances, for the most disadvantaged stratum of society. Similarly a Marxist could, and in my view should, justify differential concern for the proletariat on the basis that they are the most oppressed and dehumanized class which is also able, through its own emancipation, to bring about a state of affairs where there will be a general emancipation, where a classless society will result—enabling us finally to act on the maxim “from each according to his ability to each according to his needs.” In so acting, we will finally meet (as far as possible) everyone’s needs impartially in their individuality. In doing this we will treat each person as an equal member of a kingdom of ends where there at last can be,

and in fact comes to be, an equal respect for all people. It will be a respect which, among the various ways in which it manifests itself, will importantly manifest itself as a concern for the needs of all, not now taken as members of a class—since there are no classes—but just as individuals. The concern is that the needs of everyone be satisfied and, as far as this is possible, satisfied at the highest level of satisfaction of which each person is capable. However, each person’s need satisfaction must be compatible with, as far as they as individuals are capable of it, a similar maximal satisfaction of needs for everyone alike. Individual differences will lead to differences in need satisfaction here—that is inescapable—but the maxim we are to be guided by is the maxim that there are to be no social impediments to maximal need satisfaction for each person, compatible, as far as this is possible, with a similar treatment of everyone alike.

Such Kantian principles are not, in class societies, the principles we are *directly* to act in accordance with. Rather, in such societies, we should act in accordance with the maxim to further and protect proletarian class interests. That should be the direct maxim of our actions when we are workers or take the standpoint of labor. But in addition to the intrinsic desirability of satisfying those class interests, they are also the means to classlessness and a more general (more universal) emancipation which, a Marxist can consistently assert, is also a central *desideratum* of her struggles.

Where interests intractably conflict some interests must take pride of place, but that is a familiar situation morally. Indeed, beyond its ideological functions, it is principally for such situations that we have a morality at all, and where proletarian interests conflict with other interests Marxists say that the proletarian interests trump the other interests. But siding with labor need not imply an indifference to the other interests and, more centrally, such trumping may be perfectly in accordance with the moral point of view. The case here is parallel to that of rights, which are taken to be vital or strategic interests which normally trump other interests. In neither case is a rejection of morality implied. There is instead a moral recognition that in certain circumstances justice not only countenances but requires a differential treatment

of different people differently situated. This is something that can be perfectly universalizable and impartially justifiable. And it has, as a background assumption, the belief in the desirability and indeed in the moral requiredness of a more general emancipation where that can be attained.

A proletarian militant, particularly when she is not also a theoretician, need not engage in such complicated reasoning. In the midst of class struggle the furthering of proletarian class interests should be her aim—nothing I have said is meant to deny or obscure that. But, if Marxist social theory is approximately true, with a proletarian victory the interests of the vast majority will be furthered and with the coming of classlessness far more interests can and will be satisfied more equitably than ever before in history. To move from capitalism to classlessness through the attaining of socialism is to move to social systems which are not only increasingly humane and more fully meet human aspirations, it is also to move to societies which are increasingly more just.<sup>23</sup>

Wood to the contrary notwithstanding, Marxists can consistently assert transhistorical principles of justice. And indeed I think (*pace* Wood) that the best way of reading *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* is to read Marx as doing just that. Whatever Marx's motivations, it is important to note (as Wood acknowledges) that he does see that the proletarian movement, "is a movement which will further the long-term good of humanity generally, insofar as its destiny is to liberate humanity from class society." (693) Indeed that, on Marx's theory, is unproblematically its destiny. Suppose Marx's empirical account of the world is correct, or nearly so. Suppose further that he has understood correctly the direction of epochal social change and the nature of the new mode of production that he believes will come into existence. Now, if these empirical assumptions are correct and if that new mode of production actually does come into existence and comes to have the structure that Marx predicts it will, then the communist society of the future will be a better society than the capitalist society we live in now and better than the transitional socialist society which will in turn be better than the capitalist society which preceded it.

Wood would say "better" but not "morally better

or less unjust." But, as almost all his critics have chorused, that is merely playing with words, sticking with an arbitrarily narrow conception of morality.<sup>24</sup> It surely would be logically odd or conceptually anomalous to deny, if Marx's empirical descriptions are near to the mark, that the communist society of the future would be preferable, morally speaking (though not only morally speaking) to the previous societies. So it appears to be the case at least that Marxists cannot only coherently and consistently make moral judgments, but that they can, as well, make transhistorical moral judgments. The core arguments between Marxists and conservatives and liberals should *not* be between, on the one hand, Marxist amoralism and, on the other, conservatism or liberalism, with both the latter sticking consistently with the moral point of view. That is not the way the debate should go, for, it is not the way to see what is at issue. Instead the crucial debate should be over the respective accuracy of their competing accounts of who we were, are and are likely to become, if a nuclear war does not send us all to heaven. With some reasonable purchase on that, the debate should also center on who, without drifting into utopian fantasy, gives us the more reason to find hope in the world and who has the most adequate vision of what that hoped-for world would look like and the best conception of the modalities for its achievement. (Of course, to complicate matters, one account might be better along one of these dimensions and not so good along another.) This is, of course, a moral conception in a broad sense: a moral vision of our human life together.

I believe Marxism does better, or at least has the resources for doing better, along all of these dimensions, though I have not tried to argue that here. I have, rather, tried to show that Marxist amoralism is not the most plausible Marxist position and that someone accepting unreservedly beliefs which are at the canonical core of Marxism could consistently believe in morals and argue in evaluative terms, including moral terms, for the objective superiority of communism and socialism over capitalism. The actual argument for the superiority of socialist principles and conceptions of justice over conservative or liberal ones still has to be made. I have here, as a prolegomena, tried to

give grounds for setting aside some *prima facie* powerful Marxist roadblocks to the making of it. It is important to recognize that this, "moralized Marxism" is not a "Marxism within the limits of morality alone," for accepting a Marxism in accordance with the moral point of view does not, as we have seen, entail giving up the class interests thesis (the idea that proletarian interests come first); it does not entail or in any way establish that Marxists need construct an ethical theory to add to the foundations of Marxism and it certainly does not mean that they should cease being historical materialists and become instead historical idealists who believe that we can make fundamental changes in the world through moralizing. Marxists, while remaining historical materialists and sticking with

the moral point of view, should also be Marxist anti-moralists and deride or debunk the idealist and utopian view that we can fundamentally change the world by gaining correct moral views and presenting them in clear, sympathetic and charismatic ways. Marx was always bitterly contemptuous of such *moralism* and rightly so. There is too much at stake to place our trust in such utopianism. (Note that this itself, paradoxically, is a normative judgment.) It is in this way that Marxists are, and should be, hostile to morality, but this does not mean a rejection of morality or a turning away from the belief—a firm belief among socialists—that the capitalist system is an exploitative and thoroughly unjust social system robbing and dehumanizing vast masses of people in a quite unnecessary way.

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#### NOTES

1. Kai Nielsen, "Marx and Moral Ideology," *African Philosophical Inquiry*, vol. 1 (1987), pp. 71-86. See also my "Marxism, Morality and Moral Philosophy" in Richard M. Fox and Joseph P. DeMarco (eds.), *New Directions in Ethics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 92-112.

2. Allen W. Wood, "Marx's Immoralism" in Bernard Chavance (ed.), *Marx en Perspective* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1985), pp. 682-83. Future references to this article will be given in the text.

3. J. L. Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, (1946). For a more nuanced statement of what is essentially the same view, see his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). For some probing discussions of Mackie's account, see Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

4. In addition to the text of Wood's principally under scrutiny here, there are the following Marxist anti-moralist texts, beginning with some further texts by Allen W. Wood: "Justice and Class Interests," *Philosophica*, vol. 33, (1984), pp. 09-32; "The Marxian Critique of Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1 (1971-72), pp. 224-82; "Marx on Right and Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8 (1978-79), pp. 267-95; *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 125-56; Derek Allen, "Marx and Engels on the Distributive Justice of Capitalism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 7 (1981), pp. 221-50; Robert Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (New York: Norton, 1969), Chapter 2; Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and the Myth of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 11-27; Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 15-97; Andrew Collier, "Truth and Practice," *Radical Philosophy*, No. 5 (1973); Andrew Collier, "The Production of Moral Ideology," *Radical Philosophy*, No. 9 (1974); Andrew Collier, "Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 7 (1981), pp. 121-54; Andrew Collier, "Positive Values," *The Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary vol. 57 (1983); Kai Nielsen, "Coming to Grips with Marxist Anti-Moralism," *The Philosophical Forum* (1987); Anthony Skillen, "Marxism and Morality," *Radical Philosophy*, No. 8 (1974); Anthony Skillen, "Workers' Interests and the Proletarian Ethic: Conflicting Strains in Marxian Anti-Moralism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 7 (1981), pp. 155-70; Anthony Skillen, *Ruling Illusions: Philosophy and the Social Order* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977).

5. This is well argued by William Shaw in "Marxism and Moral Objectivity," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary vol. 7 (1981), pp. 19-44. See, as well, Kai Nielsen, "If Historical Materialism is True does Morality Totter?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 15, (1985), pp. 389-407.

6. This has been well argued, along with appropriate documentation from the texts of Marx and Engels, by John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 123-56.
7. Karl Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. by Eugene Kamenka (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 509-57.
8. Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 231-33 and 526-27. See also A. Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 15-17.
9. See here not only his "Marx's Immoralism" but also his "Justice and Class Interests." Also see, for further analysis here, my "Class Interests, Justice and Marxism," *Dialogos* vol. 50 (1987), pp. 93-120.
10. Wood, p. 686. See also Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, pp. 15-97.
11. *Ibid.*, See Frederick Hegel, *Philosophie des Rechts, Werke*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt: 1970), paragraphs #105-7.
12. *Ibid.*, see Hegel, *op. cit.*, paragraph #144.
13. *Ibid.*, see Hegel, *op. cit.*, paragraphs #135 and #153.
14. *Ibid.*, see Hegel, *op. cit.*, paragraphs #141-143 and #149.
15. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 14 (1985), pp. 223-51 and his "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77 (1980), pp. 515-72.
16. John Rawls, "The Independence of Moral Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 47 (1974-75); Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 72 (1979), pp. 256-82; and Kai Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty* (Totowa: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985), Chapter 2.
17. See Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *op. cit.*
18. Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), Chapter 4.
19. Karl Marx, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 25 (Berlin: 1961-66), pp. 351-52.
20. Karl Marx, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 19, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
21. Karl Marx, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 4, *op. cit.*, p. 472.
22. *Ibid.*
23. It is predictable that some will believe that what I have said in the above paragraph is just too *parti pris*. It has been said to me that it can hardly be right to say, as I do, that proletarian militant non-theoreticians in the midst of class struggle should not distract themselves with complicated reasoning. If they had engaged in such reasoning with any success, it was said, a few million people who are now dead might have lived. But my remark was not at all an invitation to such a militant to turn a blind eye to the vileness of gulags and the like. One does not need fine tuned moral reasoning to recognize the vileness (immorality is too weak a word) and the utter unjustifiability of such things. What I did say was that it was sufficient for his moral stance to be solidly aware of where proletarian class interests lie and to be aware that with the satisfaction of proletarian class interests we will move toward a classlessness in which far more interests will be satisfied and satisfied more equitably than ever before in history. Such a set of beliefs may be false, but false or not, accepting them is incompatible with accepting as justifiable or even as excusable the death of millions. In reality the partisanship is in my critic here and not in what I said. Cold War attitudes are very pervasive and they can blind.
24. Allen E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), pp. 52-60, 80; Ziyad Husami, "Marx on Distributive Justice," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8 (1978-79), pp. 27-64; George Brenkert, "Freedom and Private Property in Marx," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8 (1978-79), pp. 122-47; Gary Young, "Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8 (1978), pp. 421-54; Norman Geras, "On Marx and Justice," *New Left Review*, No. 150 (1985), pp. 47-89.