

# Marxism and the rejection of morality

by

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## I

I ARGUE that Marxists are not committed to insisting that morality is necessarily a rationalizing illusion cast by a repressive class structure. Marxists will argue that in our social life moral notions tend to function ideologically and that generally morality itself, as it exists in the extant moralities of class societies, plays in those societies an ideological role distorting our understanding of ourselves, of our society and of how our lives together can be changed. Moreover, it not only distorts, it functions in class societies as an instrument of social control, aiding in various ways, sometimes subtly and sometimes unsubtly, in the repression of human beings. This, Marxists claim, is an essential ideological function of morality.

I set some of these claims against what I shall call Marxist immoralism, a view having roots in certain strands of Marx's thought. It is a view, if one takes Marxism seriously, that has – or so I shall argue – a not inconsiderable plausibility, if Marx's political sociology is near the mark. All that notwithstanding, I shall argue that in the canonical parts of Marxist theory and practice there is nothing which requires Marxist immoralism or a rejection of morality. Marxist immoralism is compatible with that canon but it is not favoured by it let alone required by it.

It shall be the burden of my argument to show that a consistent Marxist need not be a nihilist or a Marxist immoralist and that, if the factual and theoretical claims of Marxism are approximately true, a socialist and eventually communist society of the future is morally preferable to capitalist societies, even the best capitalist societies.

That they will actually be better is, of course, a very tendentious claim indeed, particularly given the sad state of most existing socialisms. [13, 14] My claim, it is vital to remember in following out my argument, is *doubly* hypothetical. The first way that it is hypothetical is that I am not speaking of the existing socialisms but of what socialism essentially is, and feasibly can become, in advanced industrial societies with long democratic traditions. I am not making any claims about what Cuba or the Soviet Union is like as compared with Belgium or the United States. I am claiming instead that we have an empirically feasible conception of socialism as a theoretical model that could be instantiated under contemporary conditions and that if it were instantiated it would be a better society than any of our capitalist societies. Here, like Jürgen Habermas, I am siding with the Enlightenment commitments of modernity against postmodernist attitudes of disillusion and cultural exhaustion. But I only argue a fragment of the case here for I assume in this essay the empirical feasibility and the moral superiority of socialism. In any critically based claim that comes close to being extensive, such assumptions, it should go without saying, need a very careful defense by showing that even in Marxist terms this is a legitimate project. My task in this essay is the prior task of showing, in the face of Marxist immoralist arguments and certain Marxological considerations, that this is a legitimate approach for a Marxist. I attempt to show that Marxists can coherently, without abandoning their Marxism, make arguments that have at least a potential for soundness about one society being better than another. That accomplished, the issue of whether, as socialists actually believe, there can be in our historical epoch feasible socialist societies which are actually better than any feasible capitalist alternatives can be argued directly.<sup>1</sup> I do not try to argue that here but I do try, against certain prior impediments, to make a case for putting it on the agenda.

My claim is hypothetical in a second way. My argument for the importance of a moralized version of Marxism assumes that some central Marxist claims about what the world is like and can come to

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<sup>1</sup> This argument has been started in an open and an analytically incisive manner by Andrew Levine in [21] and [23]. (Levine briefly argues his views in ([22], pp. 19–27.)

be like are approximately true.<sup>2</sup> I show something of what some of these claims are and then argue that, *if* they are approximately true, then we should, on their basis, make certain moral claims and not try to strike a normatively neutral posture or claim that anything like this is impossible since moral conceptions cannot help being ideological twaddle.

I do indeed take these Marxist theoretical and empirical claims very seriously but I do not here argue for their truth. Rather I argue about what moral claims we should make *if* they are true. Again I want to put something on the agenda. This time it is the contention that there is a good moral case for socialism if Marxist empirical theory manages to come close to showing us how things are and how they are likely to come to be. In such a circumstance, it becomes very important indeed to see if Marxist social theory really is well taken and not the fairy tale that many believe it to be.

So my account is hypothetical in two ways: (1) preempting from a consideration of the realities of actually existing socialisms and given feasible models of what it is for a system to be socialist or capitalist, I argue that, given that simplification and that assumption, there is nothing in Marxist theory which precludes us from

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'moralized Marxism' worries me a little for it can mislead. I certainly do not mean that Marxists should become moralizers, preachers of a secular gospel, and I do not mean to retract any of my claims in [38], about Marxists not needing a moral *theory* or indeed any normative *theory* at all as an additional framework device for their account. But to say these things is very different from saying that consistent Marxists should reject morality or reject taking the moral point of view. A Marxist antimoralist need not reject morality. To be against moralism need not be to be against morality. He rejects *moralism* and (at least on most circumstances) moral ideology and he will probably reject the claim that Marxists need a moral *theory* either to underpin or to complete Marxist theory or in the defense of socialism. But saying any of these things is a far cry from saying that Marxists should be indifferent to moral considerations. Cold warriors very much want to make Marxists into 'Bolshevik amoralists'. Marxists should not take that bait. For an extensively developed view opposed here to mine, a view that argues Marxism needs a moral theory and that there is an implicit one in Marx, see [3]. It should be noted that Brenkert uses 'theory' in a much wider way than I do. When I speak of 'ethical theory' I mean something that bears some reasonable family resemblance to the things done by J. S. Mill, Kant, Sidgwick and down to contemporary moral philosophers. I do not mean just having a coherent moral vision.

asking which societies would be, morally speaking, the better societies and (2) I argue *not* that the canonical parts of Marxist social theory *are* true, but that if they are approximately true that their factual claims are an essential element in establishing the correctness of the normative claim that, morally speaking, at least some possible socialist societies are preferable to any capitalist society either actual or possible.

There is a final preliminary that I should address briefly. It can be objected that this essay, though it is about Marx and Marxism, operates entirely *within* the parameters of the dominant Anglo-American-Scandinavian tradition of analytical philosophy – a tradition that is foreign to Marx's own way of doing things. It is true that I work within that by now broad paradigm (consider the distance between Quine and Cavell) and within the tradition of what is called analytical Marxism: an approach to Marxist social theory and to Marx exegesis developed extensively in the last decade, principally in an Anglo-American and Scandinavian cultural ambience, not only by philosophers but in fruitful interdisciplinary ways by economists, political scientists, historians and sociologists. (Major contributions have been made by theoreticians from all these disciplines.)<sup>3</sup> Just as there are existentialist Marxists, structuralist Marxists and the Marxism of critical theory, so there are analytical Marxists. This analytical way of going about things was unavailable to Marx, but it is not hostile to his canonical theories. Once it is seen that analytical philosophy in general is not tied to traditional empiricism, there is no reason to see Marxism and analytical philosophy as opposing forces.

Working within the tradition of analytical Marxism has several distinct advantages over other Marxian approaches. It makes for greater clarity and precision of statement and while it does, like any other Marxism, have a commitment to making grand narratives it is equally committed to the giving of careful arguments and to main-

<sup>3</sup> For a brief characterization see ([30], pp. 846–861). John Roemer has edited a representative collection of articles in [44]. It contains a useful introduction and bibliography. In addition to the works cited in my notes 1, 5, 8 and 9 (work particularly germane to this essay), central works in analytical Marxism include [11, 12, 59, 41, 46, 16, 53].

taining as a social theory a concern for testability.<sup>4</sup> In this way it can, if it can develop proper empirical constraints, defuse much of the post-modernist critique. In the same spirit, analytical Marxism treats Marx's theory, and other Marxist theories as well, as part of a developing science subject to all the constraints a genuine empirical science is subject to. It does not want Marxism to be just another grand and consoling meta-narrative. (It is, of course, as militants rightly stress, not only a science, but has, as well, an emancipatory thrust.) There is always the risk, in so characterizing things, of falling into scientistic posturing, but risks need not add up to realities. There is no need to have a narrow conception of science in such a conceptualization that would set aside all hermeneutical concerns.

It should further be noted in connection with this final preliminary that analytical Marxism is not a foundationalist enterprise. It is rather as anti-foundationalist as Quine, Davidson and Rorty. Moreover, there is within that broad paradigm no sharp division between the concerns of philosophers and those of social scientists. Such an anti-foundationalism is far less purist about philosophy than the foundationalist approaches of logical empiricism and linguistic philosophy. That purism is certainly not anything that has ever tempted me. [35] My own approach has been deeply influenced by Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas as well as by the pragmatist and analytical traditions. And my case is reasonably typical. Where philosophers have been Marxists their thought has not unsurprisingly also been deeply influenced by the dominant philosophical culture of the society in which they live. Similar things can be said for the other disciplines.

In the history of Marxism, as I have shown elsewhere, an extensive discussion in the same ballpark as the issues discussed here takes place. [32, 36] Moreover, there have been important contribu-

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<sup>4</sup> Fredrick Crews, in an interesting collection of essays [9], renews in an insightful way a traditional charge that Marxism is a pseudo-science which is not at all founded, Marx's programmatic claims notwithstanding, on a truly empirical basis. One of the tasks of analytical Marxists, as I see it, is to state the theory so that it is in the appropriate sense testable without making the testing conditions so stringent that no social science that is at all holistic could be even weakly testable.

tions in this general area by the contemporary Continental Marxists Lucien Goldmann and Maximilien Rubel. [17, 45] These accounts have influenced my own views, but the specific problems I attempt to resolve here have their most probing examination from within the far from monolithic tradition of analytical Marxism.<sup>5</sup> So it, for this occasion, is largely within that problematic that I work, but more generally I do not work, nor do I think others should work, within the limits of analytical philosophy alone.

## II

Marxists are best understood not as rejecting morality *per se* but as rejecting something which is 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. ([39], see also [36.]) Allen Wood (a distinguished Marxologist), by contrast, sees Marx “as a critic or opponent of morality, and not merely of false moral ideas but of all morality”.<sup>6</sup> Marx, he tells us, was an immoralist. ([58], p. 683] Wood, of course, realizes that Marx’s “writings are filled with bitter denunciations of the capitalist system and its defenders, as well as extravagant praise for the radical working class movement and for those whom he views as its legitimate representatives”. ([58], p. 681) It is not clear, Wood goes on to say, which “norms or values . . . lay behind his critique of capitalism and his advocacy of communism or socialism”. ([58], p. 681) But it is clear, he continues, that Marx did have an “attitude of extreme and open hostility to moral theorizing, to moral values . . . even to morality itself”. ([58], p. 682) Given that Marx himself, in all sorts of contexts, including private correspondence, was prepared without the slightest hesitation or ambivalence to make firm moral judgments, why is it not more plausible to believe that Marx was not rejecting morality itself, but its subterranean work in the oppression of the working class,

<sup>5</sup> To see how far it is from being monolithic, compare the, at important junctures, conflicting views, and even different methodological stances, of G. A. Cohen, Richard Miller, Jon Elster and Alan Gilbert, all paradigmatic analytical Marxists.

<sup>6</sup> ([58], pp. 682–83). Future references to this article will be given in the text.

the peasantry and the like? The very passion of Marx's denunciation of morality may be explained by the moralist's hatred and contempt for the misuse of genuine morality in an *ideology* which serves repressive ruling-class interests.

Wood, however, staunchly maintains that matters run deeper than that. Notions like justice and rights, he argues, cannot consistently with what is canonical in Marxist theory have the transhistorical validity that most people, including philosophers, believe they have. Indeed, they cannot on a consistent Marxist account have any critical rational force at all. They can only have a sociological or juridical reality. What is right and just 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 what conceptions we have of them, is similarly functional for the dominant mode of production. When for a time the class struggle is intense and there is no dominant mode of production there are and can be no accepted, culturally authoritative standards of justice or of rights. These notions in such circumstances will be problematic concepts. There is no reality they can answer to. To talk, in criticizing capitalism, of the violation of the rights of workers is to substitute verbal mystification for a moralizing which has no genuine emancipatory force. What is needed instead are scientific analyses, abstract ones and concrete ones, 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 dependent on the mode of production and has no transhistorical or critical reality, i.e., there is, as J. L. Mackie would put it, no objective prescriptivity to them.<sup>7</sup> People mistakenly believe in morals – in some objective transhistorical reality that moral notions answer to – but that belief rests on a mistake. If we have a good scientific understanding, an understanding that historical material-

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<sup>7</sup> [25]. For a more nuanced statement of what is essentially the same view, see his [26]. For some probing discussions of Mackie's account, see [19].

ism 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, “According to *The German Ideology*, the discovery by historical materialism of the connections between moral ideology and material class interests has ‘broken the staff of all morality’ whatever the content of that morality might be”. ([58], p. 682) Morality, all morality, “and not just bourgeois ideology about morality”, has, Wood 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 that God is some sort of reified human projection. Neither God nor morality can be what their faithful take them to be. Neither can answer to any objective reality. Belief in God and belief in morals rest on illusions.

### III

I do not mean to deny that Marx sometimes thought he thought something like that – that is to say, he sometimes had some such meta-belief – and I do not mean to deny that some acute philosophers, both Marxist and non-Marxist, have thought something like that as well.<sup>8</sup> What I want to query is whether there is anything canonical in Marxism that commits us to this. I want to ask whether when we take what is distinctive and central to Marxist social theory we find anything that commits us to rejecting morality.

Wood believes that the destruction of the foundations of morality is one of the achievements of historical materialism. ([58], p. 682) He believes that if historical materialism is a correct scientific

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Wood’s text principally under scrutiny here, there are the following Marxist antimoralist texts, including some further texts by Wood ([57], pp. 9–32; [54], pp. 224–82; [55], pp. 267–95; [56], pp. 125–56; [1], pp. 221–250; [52], Chapter 2; [51], pp. 11–27; [31], pp. 15–97; [5]; [6]; [7], pp. 121–154; [8]; [38]; [48]; [50], pp. 155–170; [49].



account of epochal social change morality can have no rational foundation. One way the argument could go is like this: historical materialism requires that moral beliefs and conceptions be ideological, and wittingly or unwittingly, answer to class interests. Through the distorting lens of ideology they are represented in class ideology (a pleonasm) as answering to the interests of everyone alike in an even-handed way, but morality can only be moral ideology, and ideological conceptions necessarily distort our understanding of ourselves and our class situation in the interests of the hegemony of some class. They will not liberate us from oppression, but will shackle us to that oppression. Historical materialism and a Marxist theory of ideology show us why moral ideas can answer to nothing objective and why they must be 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. They tender a sociology of morals.<sup>9</sup> They show us, if they are approximately correct, how morality *typically* functions in class society, how moral notions massively and pervasively affect people's lives in class society. They show us 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, and it requires no epistemology of ethics or meta-ethic to set against moral realism or quasi-moral realism. 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 a part of the superstructure if historical materialism is true, but 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 all ideas,

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<sup>9</sup> This is well argued by William Shaw in ([47], pp. 19–44). See, as well ([34], pp 389–407).

including many of Marx's, would be ideological, and Marx would have hoisted himself by his own petard. Principles of interpretive charity will hardly allow this, 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. Even if it did not have a textual base, there is no reason why contemporary Marxists should not draw this distinction in the superstructure between ideological beliefs and non-ideological beliefs.<sup>10</sup> It allows them to say what a Marxist understanding of the sociology of morals and ideology requires: morality is *ideology prone*. It does not require the stronger claim that all moral ideas, because they are superstructural, *must* be ideological.

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

#### IV

Even if this suggestion is not followed, a good understanding of ideology would allow us to speak non-pejoratively, as Lenin and Trotsky did, of a socialist ideology. That reading will make the mark (the determining criterion) of the ideological that of answering to class interests rather than as being something which must distort our understanding of social reality. A 'nonclass ideology' *on such a conception* is a contradiction in terms. Marxists can and should, by theory-justified stipulative definition (a reformative definition), 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 of several classes. On this conception there

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<sup>10</sup> This has been well argued, along with appropriate documentation to the texts of Marx and Engels, by John McMurtry ([29], pp. 123-56).

can be both dominant class ideologies and challenging class ideologies. On this reading the mark of the ideological is that it *answers to class interests*, not that it distorts our understanding of social reality.

This squares well with Marxist texts, and has a number of other advantages. It does not set Lenin, with his talk of “socialist ideology”, into conflict with Marx. It does not make an ideology something that must, in however a disguised or elliptical way, be a form of propaganda distorting our understanding of ourselves and our world. And it does not set science and ideology on a collision course, making it the case that if a belief is ideological it cannot be a true scientific belief. An ideological belief need not distort and 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, and still, for all of that, they could have been correct or at least genuinely scientific accounts. Marx thought his economic doctrines in *Capital* were true scientific accounts, yet he believed they served proletarian interests, and that they did so was extremely important to him. 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 and still be a justified moral belief; justifiable, that is, from a disinterested point of view.

If we read the Marxist slogan ‘Morality is ideology’ as saying that all morality must be ideological like all cats must be feline, then, even on the above reading of ‘ideology’, we make Marxists say something that, to put it charitably, has to be 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 since by definition morality is ideology and again by definition we can only have ideology where we have a class society, so in classless society, given these definitions, we can have no morality. Marx, in his wilder utopian fantasies, does talk of morality, along with law, disappearing in the future communist society. ([28], pp. 509–557) But Jon Elster is surely right in saying that in a perfectly Marxist sense that is bad utopianism. ([11], pp. 231–33 and 526–27. See also [40], pp. 15–17.) We will never have such abundance that people will be able to take whatever they need

and, while in a future communist society conflicts between people may 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. Couples will split up and both will want the child or dog. There will continue to be competition for scarce positions. Not every competent person who wants the chair in Micronesian Studies can have it. 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, their interests will sometimes conflict. No matter how altruistic they may turn out to be, they will still need some impartial device to adjudicate those conflicts of interest, and this is one of the fundamental things for which we have morality and law. In a classless society and a stateless society there would be fewer such conflicts, but it is unrealistic to believe that none would 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 have two chairs in Micronesian Studies. But some conflicts would remain in any society and we need morality, or law backed up by morality, to adjudicate those conflicts fairly.

We must take care not to characterize ideology and morality so that we end up making it logically (conceptually) impossible for there to be morality in a classless society. We should not gerrymander our ways of talking so that we make it impossible to speak of morality in a classless society. To do so is merely to play with words. We can, with 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. The sociological account is an empirical account of the social functions or roles of morality in social life and sometimes, as well, an account of the origins of morality. An epistemological account, by contrast, asks ‘Can there be a moral knowledge?’, ‘What, if anything, could count as moral knowledge?’, ‘How are moral ideas validated?’, ‘What is the logical structure of moral reasoning?’ and the like. The epistemology of

morals asks whether moral ideas can be true or false and, if the former, what are the criteria of truth in ethics and what are good reasons in ethics? The sociological account asks ‘What roles do moral ideas and the institution and practices of morality play in our lives?’; ‘Do they tend to stabilize society and, if so, how? Or are they more typically a disruptive force? Or are they sometimes one and sometimes the other? Perhaps they are neither, but then what are their social roles, if they have any distinctive social roles?’. This sociological reading makes sense of Marx and Marxism. It obviates what would otherwise be paradoxes and it fits with the Marxist core. It conflicts with Marx’s remarks about morality coming to an end in a classless society, but that is not even remotely a part of the Marxist core or entailed by that core, and it is in itself wildly implausible.

## V

Allen Wood makes a distinct argument from any of those that we have canvassed.<sup>11</sup> It is an argument which has considerable plausibility for what he regards as Marx’s immoralism, and which he believes shows that Marx’s immoralism is a consistent and plausible doctrine compatible with the Marxist core. The Marxist core may, he claims, even require it. I am not concerned here to deny that a Marxist immoralism – a view of Marx as a critic of morality who also rejected morality at least in political domains – is *consistent* with Marxist core beliefs. ([31], pp. 15–97) I am concerned to give rational grounds for denying the claim that the Marxist core *requires*, or even clearly favors, Marxist immoralism.

Let me first set out Wood’s arguments. Wood sees “Marx’s immoralism as a repudiation of moral values in favour of certain nonmoral ones . . .”. ([58], p. 686) 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.” ([58], p. 686) When we see what Hegel’s conception was,

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<sup>11</sup> See here not only his [58] but also his [57]. But see, for further analysis here, my [37].

a conception which in turn was a deep repudiation of the tradition in moral philosophy coming down to us from the utilitarians and from Kant, we will see, Wood claims, if taken with historical materialism, 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 antimoral pronouncements we find in Marx's writings". ([58], p. 686)

In contrast with Mill and Kant, and indeed with 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". ([18], paragraphs §105–7( ([58], p. 686) 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". ([18], paragraph §144) (p. 686) In Hegel's theory *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* are importantly and closely interrelated, though in important ways *Moralität* is parasitic on *Sittlichkeit*. 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". ([18], paragraphs §135 and §153) 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. Without this social order the individual would be rudderless and "doomed to impotence and frustration in its attempts to realize the moral good". ([18], paragraphs §141–43 and §149) ([58], p. 686) The achievement of individual autonomy, for Hegel, "consists precisely (*sic*) in the actualization of the universal by the individual". ([58], p.686)

However, the relation of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* is not entirely parasitical. As societies move toward the Enlightenment, an ele-

ment 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 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’. ([58], p. 686)

How would someone who started with this Hegelian conception of morality come to see morality once he accepted the Marxist core of beliefs, including historical materialism? Wood’s answer comes in the following 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 a social order not as 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 functional in relation to it. Thereby, they enjoin from each individual the behaviour 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. ([58], p. 687)

Whatever Marx may have believed here – and Wood recognizes that our claims must remain speculative, for we have no texts to seize on – a Marxist, starting from the Marxist core, need not accept 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 what Marxists take to be 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". ([58], p. 686) 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 is arguably insightful. We need to excise "objective norms" and "rational" from the characterization. The demythologized version reads: "*Sittlichkeit* is the set of institutions and deeply embedded cultural 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". This less philosophically loaded characterization of *Sittlichkeit* still brings out its vital social function and 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. It is a conception of morality as something a society must have to have a morality. The historical materialist, starting with such a conception of *Sittlichkeit*, does not need to say anything about the necessity of a belief in objective rational moral norms – which Marxists then proceed to expose as illusory. The historical materialist, given his sociology, should not say that the social order recognized by *Sittlichkeit* is a *rational* social order which Marxists, in turn, expose as irrational, repressive and dehumanizing. Whether it is irrational depends on whether it is a class society and, if a class society, on 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 have a distinctive *Sittlichkeit*, but hopefully 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 be unavoidable in any social order, including a classless society. In my characterization, morality as *Sittlichkeit* need not make the 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 mystify most people into believing something that at least bears a family resemblance to what Hegel believed, namely that the set of institutions to which they are heir are the objective norms of a living rational order. They have, it will generally be believed, in some mysterious way objective prescriptivity. There is, by most people, probably going to be this kind of believing in morals in any social order, or at least in any society prior to a thoroughly developed classless society where social relations, it is plausible to expect, will be far more transparent than they are now. Marxists, given their core theory, which is in its relevant respects here an empirical sociological account, will expose this Hegelian talk about a rational social order and objective norms as ideology that in bourgeois societies obfuscates. They will show how bowdlerized conceptions of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* get infused into how people think of 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 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 gave it. Morality, while no longer moral ideology, could 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 that go with our interlocked set of institutions. These norms are what John Rawls characterized as our firmest considered judgments. ([43], pp 512–572) Now, starting with them and by utilizing a coherentist model of justification and rationalization, we would seek to get them into a coherent package where they square with everything we know. This would involve, in our reasoning from such a *Sittlichkeit*, a good measure of winnowing out of these culturally received norms. Moreover, because we are seeking a wide pattern of coherence with our factual beliefs, theoretical conceptions, moral theories and firm moral beliefs all fitting into a coherent whole, we will not be content with a simple matching of

specific moral convictions with abstract moral principles. We will appeal not only to the abstract moral principles emerging out of *Moralität* in its reciprocal relations with *Sittlichkeit*, but, as well, to the very best social theories we have (empirical-cum-theoretical theories which are both descriptive-explanatory and interpretive). ([42]; [10], pp. 256–82; [33], Chapter 2.) If the Marxist core social theory is correct, these will be largely Marxist theories. Utilizing this coherence model of justification, we will shuttle back and forth between those elements until, for a time, we gain a coherent package of beliefs and principles. This equilibrium will no doubt require us to modify and weed out norms from our culturally inherited *Sittlichkeit*, from our more individually concocted abstract norms and, sometimes at least, we will find it necessary to devise new ones and to put new questions to social theory and perhaps in various ways to modify our social theory.

This coherentism of wide reflective equilibrium (to use Rawls's phrase for the above) will give us a demythologized sense of how morality could come, in the constructivist sense John Rawls speaks of, to have an objective justification, and how some of its norms could be said, in a fallibilistic spirit, to be rational and objectively valid, though here objectivity would reside in an intersubjectivity resting on the kind of consensus attained in wide reflective equilibrium. (See [43] Recall that we are talking about what morality could come to, and predictably would come to in a classless society if Marx's political sociology is near to the mark. Morality, as the long quotation from Wood brings out, would remain largely ideology in class divided societies which are not (as socialism is in the transition) on their way to becoming classless societies.

Starting with a streamlined Hegelian conception of morality, we have shown what it would be like in a classless society to have a non-ideological morality and how, in class-divided societies, morality is going to be very largely ideological in the pejorative sense. In a classless society morality still gets much of its content from customary norms – the shared considered judgment of the society. Without this cluster of norms individuals would not be recognizably human, let alone capable of achieving rational autonomy (rational self-direction), but, as *Moralität* recognizes, this is not all rational

autonomy and selfmastery come to. Morality is not just our station and its duties. What would obtain in a classless society 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 the material conditions propitious for individuals obtaining autonomy and self-mastery. In such circumstances some of them will successfully avail themselves of the conditions culturally in place for attaining autonomy, and thus making, for the first time in history, universal human emancipation a real possibility. There would, however, for the reasons we have given, still be conflicts of interest in the society. We would not only have a morality of emancipation, but a morality as *Sittlichkeit* that would have, as a proper part, a morality of *Recht*, though that element might become less prominent. (Steven Lukes [24] disagrees).

## VI

I have shown here how someone, starting with historical materialism and the roughly Hegelian understanding of morality Wood adverts to, could come out with a rejection of Marxist immoralism (of Marx's immoralism, if it was that) and claim instead in a thoroughly classless society we would, on core Marxist premises, have a non-ideological morality. (Given what ideology is we logically could not have an *ideological* morality in a classless society.) We could on Marxist premises draw these conclusions while remaining 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*. There we have, distorted by ideology, a false picture of a system of norms answering to universal human interests. But in classless societies, if Marxist social theory is correct, it will 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 would no longer be subversive of rationality, and we could speak of the *Sittlichkeit* of such a society

and of its norms roughly as Hegel does. The society in Rawls's sense would be well-ordered.

This is not to gainsay Wood's powerful and correct point that as a matter of sociological fact morality must, in most of its employments, continue to function as a form of ideology in class societies. A lucky few will be able to see through it and identify some judgments that are not hobbled by ideological deformation, e.g., that friendship carries with it commitments and that friendship between human beings is a precious thing. Indeed, it is reasonable to believe that some of the moral judgments that dot Marx's and Engels's texts and the texts of other classical Marxists are 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. In doing that, it works against the very rationality and autonomy it professes to fulfill. To achieve autonomy, we need to see through the deception and see the needs and interests misrepresented by moral demands for what they are, and come to "relate to these needs and interests directly instead of relating to them in the glorified form they assume to moral consciousness". ([58], p. 687) In this sense communism should abolish morality, and historical materialism should "break the staff of all morality" by exposing the real meaning of moral demands in class society. ([58], pp. 687-88) This is the underlying claim of Marxist immorality.

## VII

It might be argued 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 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 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". ([27], Vol. 25, pp. 351–52) (p. 288–89) To try to use justice as a critical social term, Marx argues, is worse than useless. It is antithetical to these class interests for it perverts the understanding workers have of their personal interests, their class interests, and the relation between these two. Instead of helping them clearly to see their situation it fills their heads with a lot of "obsolete verbal rubbish" about right and justice. ([27], Vol. 19, p. 22) 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". ([58], p. 691) Proletarian revolutionaries should be, on Marx's account, resolute, disillusioned individuals who understand what class society is like and know the line of march, the steps to be taken. With their understanding of the nature of moral ideology, they know how in capitalist societies law, morality, and religion are no more than bourgeois prejudices masking bourgeois interests. ([27], Vol. 4, p. 472) Morality generally and justice in particular, 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, it, in the midst of class struggle, comes to a selling out of the interests of the proletariat. A well informed proletarian, clearly aware of his class interests and his individual interests, will not take this disinterested path of justice. He will put his class interests first. The thing for him to do is relentlessly and intelligently 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". ([27], Vol. 4, p. 472) Militants should not distract themselves with extensive worries about what is just or fair, 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 for more than one. To rally oneself around such moralistic positioning will only stand in the way of revolution

and of human emancipation.

That point could be accepted for what most militants and most proletarians, militants or nonmilitants, are to do in the midst of a determinate class struggle, while it would still remain unclear whether that should be their theoretical practice in all contexts, including those in which the struggle is disguised, i.e., contexts in which most people do not see the situation as a class struggle. It is not evident what all Marxist theoreticians who may also be militants are to do in such contexts. In the familiar context – the pervasive semitheoretical and somewhat academic contexts of our societies – in which Marxists have been painted by anti-Marxists as unprincipled amoralists or nihilists, theoretically defenseless in the face of totalitarianism, talk about principled amoralism may not be convincing.

Wood, in this context, mentions a possible Marxist justificatory move which he quickly sets aside on the ground that there is no sign that Marx was ever concerned with it. But if the question is what a Marxist could plausibly maintain, given the *prima facie* unsatisfactoriness of sticking with amoralism, Wood's suggestion might be worth pursuing. The suggestion is that it might be moral and just, in an objective and non-ideological sense, "to countenance differential concern with the interests of different groups, if such a concern could be justified by some general principles of justice or the greatest good of all. . .". ([58], p. 693) Thus John Rawls, with his overall conception of justice as fairness, justifies the greatest concern for the most disadvantaged stratum of society. Similarly a Marxist could justify differential concern for the proletariat on the basis that they are the most oppressed and dehumanized class that is able, through its own emancipation, to bring about a general emancipation: a classless society enabling us to act on the maxim from each according to his ability to each according to his needs and thereby meeting (as far as possible) everyone's needs impartially in their individuality and thus treating each person as an equal member of a kingdom of ends where there is an equal respect for all people. This respect will manifest itself as a concern for the needs of all, not as members of a class – since there would be no classes – but as individuals. The concern that the needs of everyone be satisfied

at the highest possible level is compatible with a similar maximal need satisfaction of the distinctive needs of everyone alike. Individual differences will lead to differences in need satisfaction, but the maxim we are to be guided by is that there are to be no social impediments to maximal need satisfaction for each person, as far as this is compatible with a similar treatment of everyone.

Where interests intractably conflict some must take pride of place, but that is a familiar situation morally. Indeed, it is principally for such situations that, beyond its ideological functions, we have a morality at all, and where proletarian interests conflict with others Marxists say that the proletarian interests trump others. But this siding with labour need not imply an indifference to the other interests and trumping may be in accordance with the moral point of view. This is parallel to the way in which those vital or strategic interests that rights are taken to be normally trump other interests. In neither case is a rejection of morality implied. Instead there is a recognition that in certain circumstances justice requires a differential treatment of people differently situated. This is perfectly universalizable and impartially justifiable. It has, as a background assumption, the belief in the desirability and moral necessity of a more general emancipation.

Wood notwithstanding, Marxists can consistently assert transhistorical principles of justice: the best way of reading *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* is to take Marx as doing that. Whatever Marx's motivations, he does see, as Wood acknowledges, that the proletarian movement, in a way "no other movement as fully could, is a movement which will further the long-term good of humanity generally, insofar as its destiny is to liberate humanity from class society". ([58], p. 693) On Marx's theory that is its destiny. If his empirical account of the world is nearly correct, if he has understood the direction of epochal social change and the nature of the new mode of production that he believes will come into existence, and if that new mode of production comes into existence and has the structure Marx predicts, 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. ([41, pp 52–60, 80; [20], pp. 27–64; [2], pp. 122–47; [60], pp. 421–54; [15], pp 47–89). It surely would be logically odd, conceptually anomalous, to claim that, if Marx's empirical descriptions are near the mark, the communist society of the future would not be morally preferable to previous societies. So it appears that Marxists can coherently and consistently make transhistorical moral judgments. The core arguments between Marxists, on the one hand, and conservatives and liberals on the other, should *not* be between Marxist amoralists and conservatives and liberals who stick with the moral point of view. The crucial debate should be over the accuracy of their competing account of *who we were, are and are likely to become* (if nuclear war does not send us all to heaven) and over *who, without drifting into utopian fantasy, gives us more reason to find hope in the world, and has the most adequate vision of what that hoped-for world would look like and the best conception of how to achieve it.* This in a broad sense is a moral vision of our human life together.

I believe Marxism has the resources for doing better along all of these dimensions than its alternatives, 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 the beliefs which are at the canonical core of Marxism, could consistently believe in morals and argue in moral terms for the objective superiority of communism and socialism over capitalism. This argument, however, still has to be made. I have here, as a prolegomenon, tried to give grounds for setting aside some *prima facie* powerful Marxist roadblocks to that end. My 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, we have seen, entail giving up the class interests thesis (the idea that proletarian interests come first). It does not 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 historical idealists



who believe 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 always was bitterly contemptuous of such *moralism*: there is too much at stake to place our trust in such utopianism. (Note 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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