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ENGELS ON MORALITY AND MORAL THEORIZING

I

Friedrich Engels wrote more fully and perhaps more adequately about morality than did Karl Marx, though, indeed, many of the Engels' disparagers would deny the latter part of that claim. My interest here is neither to affirm nor to deny that but to try to see what Engels' views about morality were and something of their import. I shall try here clearly to articulate what they were and spot their underlying rationale. I shall present a sympathetic view of Engels' account as well as a view which will attempt, where the text is vague, both to note that vagueness and to place as plausible an interpretation on the text as the text will reasonably yield. A critique of that view, as well as an examination of whether anything useful can be built from it, will have to await another occasion.

With Engels, as with any other theorist of at least putative stature, I think it is well to proceed on a principle of interpretative charity. Where an unstrained but reasonable interpretation can be put on a text put that interpretation on it. See how much sense it can reasonably yield. This is precisely what I shall attempt to do in my account of Engels on morality and moral theorizing.

II

Engels' views on morality and moral philosophy can be usefully related to his appropriation of a reaction to the Enlightenment. He, more than Marx, stresses his indebtedness to the Enlightenment.¹ In the first paragraph of *Anti-Dühring*, Engels remarks that modern socialism is, on its theoretical side, linked with the Enlightenment. He sees it as "a further and ostensibly more consistent extension of the principles established by the great French philosophers of the Eighteenth Century" (p. 23). They, Engels remarks, did yeoman's service in "clearing the minds of men for the coming revolution" and indeed they, as Engels put it, acted themselves "in an extremely revolutionary

fashion" (p. 23). And here, though Engels has just referred to the importance for socialism of class struggle and of economics, he also refers to something very superstructural indeed, namely, to ideas. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, he remarks, acted in an exemplary revolutionary fashion by recognizing "no external authority of any kind". They relentlessly subjected "religion, conceptions of nature, society, political systems, everything to the most merciless criticism: everything had to justify its existence at the bar of reason. . ." (p. 23). Principles arrived at by untrammelled, rigorously pursued human ratiocination are to provide "the basis of all human action and association" (p. 23).

There was something both giddy and emancipatory about this, yet, on Engels' view, it was hyperbolic as well. The following quotation well captures the flavor of his view of the Enlightenment:

All previous forms of society and government, all the old ideas handed down by tradition, were flung into the lumber-room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be guided solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now for the first time appeared the light of day; henceforth, superstition, injustice, privilege and oppression were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal justice, equality grounded in Nature and the inalienable rights of man (p. 23).

Engels makes it very clear that he regards this as both a progressive move and an important bit of bourgeois ideological mystification. In the very next paragraph after the one quoted above Engels remarks:

We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealised kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that eternal justice found its realisation in bourgeois justice; that equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the Social Contract of Rousseau, came into existence and could only come into existence as a bourgeois democratic republic. No more than their predecessors could the great thinkers of the eighteenth century pass beyond the limits imposed on them by their own epoch (p. 24).

But in this social world, with all its social mystifications, class struggle continued and took a new turn. There was, of course, the struggle between the feudal nobility and the bourgeoisie; but there was also the emerging struggle between the bourgeoisie (the exploiters) and the proletariat (the exploited toiling poor). The moral ideology of the bourgeoisie was in this circumstance a useful one: they represented themselves as speaking for "the whole of suffering humanity" (p. 24). Yet this ideology did not go unchallenged even

then. The idea that the bourgeoisie with their values and their outlook represented the “interests of the different sections of the workers” was challenged by Thomas Münzer, Babeuf and the Levellers. Indeed this challenge was not just talk but involved “revolutionary armed uprisings of a class which was as yet undeveloped” and, paralleling this practical activity, there was the theoretical activity of the great utopian socialists (Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen). They, going beyond the *philosophes*, made claims for equality which were “no longer limited to political rights but were extended also to the social conditions of individuals. . .” (p. 24). It was not only class privileges that were to go but the very existence of class distinctions themselves. This radically egalitarian social ideal was related directly to a consciously materialist world-view (p. 25).

However, unlike Marx and Engels, these utopian socialists did not, in articulating their theories and ideals, put themselves forward as “representatives of the interests of the proletariat”; like “the philosophers of the Enlightenment, they aimed at the emancipation not of a definite class but of all humanity” (p. 25). They, like the *philosophes*, wanted to establish “the kingdom of reason and eternal justice”; but, unlike the *philosophes*, they took the bourgeois world, and certain central moral conceptions of such *philosophes* reflecting and rationalizing that world, to be “irrational and unjust” (p. 25). Yet they remained thorough utopians and historical idealists, for, as Engels ironically puts it, “if pure reason and justice have not hitherto ruled the world, this has been due to the fact that until now men have not rightly understood them” (p. 25). To change the world, these historical idealists argued, we need men of genius to recognize the true nature of reason and justice and perspicuously to articulate such a conception of the world. These utopians believed that such persons, with luck, can come along almost any time, and, when this happy accident occurs, humanity will in short order be emancipated.

This view, Engels remarks, is the view of all early socialists. For them

. . . socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice, and needs only to be discovered to conquer the world by virtue of its own power; as absolute truth is independent of time and space and of the historical development of man, it is a mere accident when and where it is discovered (p. 25).

So far Engels has been giving us social history, though indeed, an interpretative social history, spiced with descriptive ethical remarks. That is to say,

he is making some remarks which could occur in a work in descriptive ethics. Without developing in this part of *Anti-Dühring* moral arguments of his own or expressing moral views of his own, except perhaps by indirection, Engels displays the moral conceptions of the *philosophes* and the utopian socialists and shows us something of the role they played in the social history of the time and something of the import their work had for the development of socialism.

However, Engels contrasts his and Marx' attempts to set socialism on a sound scientific basis with utopian socialism and criticizes the utilization of moral arguments by the utopians.² The great defect of their arguments was their subjectivism. Indeed there is in their work much talk of absolute truth, reason and justice, but each socialist group has a different conception of these notions. Each utopian's "special kind of absolute truth, reason and justice is in turn conditioned by his subjective understanding, his conditions of existence, the measure of his knowledge and intellectual training. . ." (p. 26). So we have here only the sectarian illusion of objectivity rather than a genuine objectivity. What can be distilled from such a tower of babel is "a kind of eclectic average socialism" (p. 26). And it is indeed this bland variety of socialism that has come to dominate "the minds of most socialist workers in France and England. . ." (p. 26). This can, Engels argues, only confuse the workers in their struggle for emancipation (p. 26). What, by contrast, must be done, to give us an effective tool in the struggle for our emancipation, is to set socialism on a solid scientific foundation.

I shall not comment here on Engels' conception of scientific socialism save to say that it must, on his view, be both dialectical and empirical and see the world as an ever-changing and in some way unified and developing world in which we no longer content ourselves with "observing natural objects and natural processes in their isolation" detached from a changing vast interconnection of things (p. 27).³ Sound common sense, Engels argues, inclines us very strongly to take a synchronic view and to look at things as discrete objects in isolation from each other and to take things as relatively fixed and unchanging. This atomistic way of viewing things found its intellectual defense in British empiricism – a view which Engels derisively refers to as a metaphysical rather than a scientific way of viewing things. Science, by contrast, Engels claims, breaks with this sturdy common sense and notes carefully the interconnections between things, looks at things holistically and never forgets that "everything is in flux" (p. 27).⁴ (Engels, in speaking of the

'dialectics of nature', even contrasts a dialectical view of reality with a metaphysical one (p. 29.) Moreover, as we learned from Hegel, we should not only look at things diachronically, we should look at them teleologically as well. We, if we wish to be genuinely scientific, should no longer see history "as a confused whirl of senseless deeds" but, following Hegel, "as the process of development of humanity itself" (p. 30). We should seek, in a careful, rigorously empirical and systematic fashion, to trace in society the "regularities running through all its apparently fortuitous phenomena" (p. 30).

Engels, against the Hegelian system, took the scientific attitude to be a thoroughly fallibilistic one. But, no more than Peirce or Dewey, did he think that this forced him into a relativism. Engels put the matter quite unequivocally:

A system of natural and historical knowledge which is all-embracing and final for all time is in contradiction to the fundamental laws of dialectical thinking; which however, far from excluding, on the contrary includes, the idea that the systematic knowledge of the external universe can make giant strides from generation to generation (p. 31).

Engels moved away, as did Marx as well, not only from conceptions of 'absolute truth' to a fallibilism; he moved from a historical idealism to a historical materialism as well.

However, Engels, revolutionist that he was, did stress a kind of evolutionary picture of the development of society and, beyond a historical materialism, he also argued for a materialism in the sense that many philosophers in Anglo-American societies are now materialists. "Modern materialism", Engels remarked, "sees history as the process of the evolution of humanity, and its own problem as the discovery of laws of motion of this process" (p. 31). He takes this modern materialism as embracing the essential advance of natural science — a view which sees nature as having a history — and, as being, as Engels put it, "essentially dialectical" (p. 31).

He also had a view of what philosophy would become in this essentially dialectical-materialist world perspective which in important ways is like that of the positivists. We have in such a world perspective no longer a need of "philosophy standing above the other sciences" (p. 31). From there, Engels goes on to remark in a very positivist manner,

As soon as each separate science is required to get clarity as to its position in the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things, a special science dealing with this

totality is superfluous. What still independently survives of all former philosophy is the science of thought and its laws – formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is merged in the positive science of Nature and history (p. 31).⁵

However, in the very next paragraph, after reminding us again of the present state of the class struggle and adverting to its pervasiveness in all societies up to the present time, Engels reasserts the importance for a scientific socialism, and for a scientific account of society generally, including our understanding of the role of morality in society, of historical materialism or what he called “a materialist conception of history”. A clear view of the history of civilization would direct us to focus on the conflicting material interests of the different antagonistic classes. With this focus, we would come to recognize

that *all* past history was the history of class struggles, that these warring classes of society are always the product of the conditions of production and exchange, in a word, of the *economic* conditions of their time; and therefore the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which, in the last analysis, is to be explained the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions, as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other conceptions of each historical period (p. 32).⁶

Historical idealism explains man’s “being by his consciousness”; historical materialism reverses it and explains his “consciousness by his being” (p. 32).⁷ It is in this stress on historical materialism and dialectics that scientific socialism makes a considerable advance on moralizing utopian socialism (p. 32). Utopian socialism indeed did criticize “the existing capitalist mode of production and its consequences” but its criticism was essentially a *moral* one. It “could only simply reject them as evil” (p. 33). Scientific socialism, by contrast, does not just give a critical account from the moral perspective of the capitalist system but explains it and so provides the intellectual basis for gaining a mastery over it (p. 33). It will enable us to see how capitalism arises and must persist for a given time but it will also enable us to see how, with the development of the productive forces and with the intensification of class struggle, capitalism must in time collapse (p. 33). By understanding how exploitation works through understanding how surplus value is extracted, and by understanding historical materialism, workers will have put in their hands key intellectual weapons to use in their struggle for emancipation. This, more than any portrayal of what are plainly the evils of capitalism, will move forward the struggle against capitalism.⁸

III

Engels begins his chapters on morality in *Anti-Dühring* with a critique of what we would now call ethical rationalism and a statement of a fallibilistic world-outlook: a view which captures what is important about relativism and historicism without becoming entrapped in its paradoxes and without (or so I shall argue) committing its errors (pp. 94–104). His immediate target is Dühring but his critique would apply to an important ethical rationalist such as Kant or Sidgwick and to contemporary versions of ethical rationalism such as Alan Gewirth's or Alan Donagan's and, less directly, but still correctly, to philosophers such as Aquinas, Descartes and Locke. The extreme ethical rationalist claim is that there are moral truths which have the same validity or a very similar validity to mathematical truths. They are, that is, truths which are said to have a categorical authoritativeness and a final and ultimate validity. There are, such rationalists claim, substantive moral truths of absolute certainty which are also eternal truths that no rational agent can deny (pp. 103, 93). The moral world has its permanent principles and utterly certain foundational claims. Moreover, the argument goes, such claims are not only true but it is also the case that without such a belief we are subject to a mordant skepticism or led to chaos and nihilism (pp. 95, 100–1).

Engels thinks that this rationalist claim is at best a confusion and at worst pompous nonsense. Against such ethical rationalism and such a quest for certainty generally, Engels contrasts a realistic view which sees people making such 'unconditioned' knowledge claims against the background of being a particular people of a distinctive class and social group at a particular time and with a necessarily limited, culturally and historically determinate, group of background beliefs plainly circumscribed by a culturally and historically skewed information base. "Individual human beings with their extremely limited thought" are, with a lack of self-awareness or a lack of sense of history and cultural space, unselfconsciously claiming that the character of human thought is absolute (p. 97). Despite all this, Engels asks, are there not any truths "which are so securely based that any doubt of them seems to us to amount to insanity" (p. 97)? Engels answers quite unequivocally, "Certainly there are" (p. 97). In rejecting ethical rationalism, he is not at all driven to skepticism or nihilism. Unlike the skeptic, or even an extreme historicist, Engels is perfectly willing to accept "*eternal truth*" (p. 97).

However, they are not such truths as would be of any comfort to rationalists

– including ethical rationalists. To see what Engels has in mind here it is worthwhile attending closely to his discussion in the first part of Chapter 9 of *Anti-Dühring* (pp. 97–101). If we consider the “three great departments of knowledge” – (1) mathematics and the natural sciences, (2) the biological sciences and (3) the historical sciences (what we would now call the human sciences) – we will find, for the most part, Engels claims, a changing, growing, developing body of warranted beliefs most of which are anything but certain and certainly not something which, taken together, constitutes a body of final ultimate truths. “Often enough discoveries such as that of the cell in the biological sciences are such as to compel us to make deep revisions in our understanding of biological phenomena”. Where in biology, as elsewhere, we get “pure and immutable truths”, we will have to be content with platitudes such as “All men are mortal”, “All female mammals have lacteal glands”, “A man who gets no food dies of hunger”, “Paris is in France” and the like (pp. 97, 99). Those platitudes, together with analytic platitudes, such as “Twice two makes four” and “The three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” are our “eternal, final and ultimate truths” (p. 98). But most scientific knowledge is not of that character, though these platitudes can be trotted out to counter the epistemological skeptic. We can rightly claim that we are more confident of their truth than we can be of any skeptical philosopher’s claim that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, we do not after all really know these things.

However, none of these truths – these commonplaces – are moral truths and turning more in the direction of what possibly could turn up as some roughly analogous ‘moral truths’ we find Engels, quite plausibly, saying of the historical sciences that there “our knowledge is more backward than” in other domains of knowledge (pp. 99). (But, note, morality is being conceived of as a domain of knowledge.) In studying “human life, social relationships, forms of the law and the state”, we do not have the regularities that we have in physics and biology. Because of this, the historical sciences are in a far worse plight than the biological or natural sciences (p. 99). “Knowledge,” Engels remarks,

is here essentially relative, inasmuch as it is limited to the perception of relationships and consequences of certain social and state forms which exist only at a particular epoch and among particular people and are of their very nature transitory. Anyone therefore who sets out on this field to hunt down final and ultimate truths, truths which are pure and absolutely immutable, will bring home but little, apart from platitudes and

commonplaces of the sorriest kind – for example, that generally speaking man cannot live except by labour; that up to the present mankind for the most part has been divided into rulers and ruled; that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821, and so on (p. 100).

Nevertheless, even here, we gain some platitudes which, though not *a priori*, still give us some ‘absolute, eternal and ultimate truths’. But again they are not even remotely sufficient to build a science of man on and they are not moral or normative truths. We do not have anything that forms a basis for ethical rationalism.

Engels notes that philosophers play a comforting trick on themselves. They note that there are these platitudes which are eternal, absolute truths of various sorts, to wit ‘Birds have beaks’ and ‘Twice two makes four’ and then, by a kind of hat trick, they conclude that there must also be “eternal truths in the sphere of human history – eternal morality, eternal justice and so on – which claim a validity and scope equal to those of the truths and deductions of mathematics” (p. 100). But we have not been shown that there are any such truths. What we in reality have is a tower of Babel of the philosophers and theologians each claiming, in various ways and in various idioms, that they have such truths and that all the others are quite mistaken. Most of them believe that they, with a new Copernican turn, have in their “bag, all ready made, final and ultimate truth and eternal justice” (p. 100). Of such claims to an Archimedean point, Engels remarks with a thoroughly realistic world-weariness: “This has all happened so many hundreds and thousands of times that we can only feel astonished that there should be people credulous enough to believe this, not of others, but of themselves” (p. 100). But the fact is there are such people and that they typically fly “into high moral indignation when other people deny that any individual whatsoever is in a position to hand out to us the final and ultimate truth” (p. 100). Of this Engels remarks: “Final and ultimate truths” in the domain of morals are very sparsely sown indeed: even more so than in the domain of factual truth. “The conceptions of good and bad have varied so much from nation to nation and from age to age that they have often been in direct contradiction to each other” (p. 103). Moreover, we get no place at all with the truism ‘Good is good and evil is evil’. At most this reminds us that there are moral matters we care about and care about deeply. What we want and of course do not get from anything like that is a criterion for choosing between the various extant moralities.

We have Catholic–Christian moralities and Protestant–Christian moralities.

And we have more modernizing moralities such as bourgeois morality and the “proletarian morality of the future”. To know that ‘Good is to be done and evil avoided’ and that ‘Good is good and bad is bad’ is not going to help us choose between them. Indeed they do not, being tautologies, function as action-guides at all.

What we want to know is how are we going to choose between these positive moralities. Which, if any one, is the true one or the approximately true one and how would we decide? Engels makes it quite clear that an ethical rationalism will not help us here. There is no showing that one of them or some new philosophical morality created by some super-Dühring will help us here. There is no showing that they have any kind of absolute prescriptivity. But this does not justify our taking a relativist or subjectivist turn, for some of these moralities have, in Engels’ words, more “durable elements” than others. They are not all on a par such that you must just plump for which one to accept. You will not find Engels supporting anything like the contemporary liberal shibboleth that in the domain of ultimate values decision is king. But he is not defending a morality of categorical prescriptivity either. Still, his denials here do not lead him to relativism or skepticism. The proletarian morality has, as Engels sees it, “the maximum of durable elements” (p. 104). It has a coherent vision of a future proletarian emancipation: an emancipation that will lead to a general human emancipation and to the construction of a human and classless society without exploiter and exploited, master and slave, ruler and ruled.

Engels rejects any moral absolutism with ultimate changeless moral truths and principles. But he does not think that anything goes morally or that there can be no progress or development in our moral thinking.⁹ He does not defend ethical subjectivism or skepticism. That there are no ultimate truths in morality does not mean that there are no proximate truths (p. 104).

As an explanation of why this is so historical materialism is important and Engels brings it into play at just this juncture. The above theses in descriptive ethics could be asserted and established to be true. But these are all statements of empirical fact about people’s moral beliefs; they are not themselves moral or normative utterances. Moreover, while historical materialism would not justify this developmental non-absolutism in ethics, it could explain it and that is exactly how Engels does utilize it.¹⁰ He utilizes it in this way but he also utilizes it critically as well as a ground for rationally rejecting ethical rationalism. If an ethical rationalist tries to legitimate a claim that

such and such is an ultimate moral truth or set of such truths on the ground that the “moral world . . . has its permanent principles which transcend history and the differences between nations”, historical materialism is, if true, a very effective counter. For with it one can show that that rationalist claim does not square with the actual or realistically possible structure or design of the moral world: moralities and “moral theories are the product, in the last analysis, of the economic stage which society” has reached at “a particular epoch” (p. 105). These societies, as the productive forces develop, change by means of class struggle. Societies in the past have been class societies and they will remain so up until the thorough consolidation of socialism (p. 105). And the moralities of these class societies are class moralities.

The “three classes of modern society, the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, each have their special morality”. Engels concludes from this

that men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their moral ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based – from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange (p. 104).

‘Derive’ could mean here ‘logically deduce’ or ‘causally spring’. I take it that Engels means the latter for (a) on the first reading the thesis is absurd, (b) the latter reading squares with the causal explanatory role of historical materialism and (c) the latter reading has plausibility and point. (I am here operating with the rather standard maxim of interpretative charity.) ‘That group *X* are members of the feudal aristocracy’ does not entail that ‘group *X* ought to have a Christian-feudal morality’. But what is at least plausible to say is that most members of a feudal aristocracy will as a matter of fact be committed to a Christian-feudal morality and that people standing in these productive relations will naturally and, indeed, generally speaking almost unavoidably come to have a distinctive morality which matches with and tends to help reinforce and to preserve for a time that distinctive set of production relations: production relations which in periods of social stability neatly match with moral conceptions which function to maintain them. In turn these production relations provide the causal basis for these moral ideas having, for a time, though surely not forever, a solid social exemplification.

Still, during a given historical period there will be common elements shared by the different class moralities (p. 104). In our epoch, Christian morality, bourgeois morality and proletarian morality “represent three different stages

of the same historical development, and have therefore a common historical background, and for that reason alone they have much in common" (p. 104).

Engels states his case in even stronger terms. "In similar or approximately similar stages of economic development moral theories must of necessity be more or less in agreement" (p. 104). Societies with the institution of private property need a widely recognized and socially enforced injunction 'Do not steal' for them to function effectively. (I take it the above 'must' is a causal and not a logical or moral 'must' and I take 'moral theories' here importantly to include 'moralities'.) Except in periods of revolution some given class or temporarily co-operating cluster of classes will be dominant in any society. But even the contending antagonistic classes of a class society will have, even with their clashing moralities, moralities with some common content with that of the morality of the dominant class. This common content will result from their common historical background and from the need of those moralities, in one way or another, to support to some degree at least the economic relations of that society. Bases need superstructures. We can speak here of the functional role of these moralities.

Moralities and moral theories function as moral ideologies in class societies. They have

either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or, as soon as the oppressed class has become powerful enough, it has represented the revolt against this domination and has been expressive of the future interests of the oppressed (p. 105).

Moralities have purported to be systems of eternal moral truth while in reality they have supported class interests, including very typically the interests of the ruling class. They have done the typically mystifying ideological work of supporting class interests while representing themselves as purveyors of a higher truth answering to the interests of all humankind.

However, notwithstanding his recognizing very clearly the ideological role of morality, Engels also believes that, emerging out of these class struggles, there has been moral progress, giving the lie to the rather common belief that Marxists, or at least one very prominent Marxist (the first Marxist after Marx, as it were), thought that in the very nature of the case moral conceptions were so distorting and mystifying that there could be no coherent sense in speaking of moral progress or of one moral conception of things or way of organizing society being more adequate than another. There have been nihilists or moral skeptics who have thought that, but there is no good textual

warrant for saddling Engels (or for that matter Marx) with the view that all moral conceptions are without any coherent sense or are, in the nature of the case, subjective or rest on some kind of error. Engels, quite confidently, without the least ambivalence, asserts that “there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of knowledge. . .” (p. 105). That, he tells us, “cannot be doubted” (p. 105).

However, even with this progress, Engels continues, we have “not yet passed beyond class morality”. Though note that this clearly indicates that he believes that there can be moralities that are not class-bound (p. 105). Engels goes on to say, echoing a phrase from Marx’s *Paris Manuscripts* and ending with a remark that resonates with their *Critique of the Gotha Programme*,

A really human morality which transcends class antagonisms and their legacies in thought becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class contradictions but has even forgotten them in practical life (p. 108).

This shows, as clearly as can be, how Engels, while rejecting ethical rationalism, and accepting a fallibilistic world-view, did not regard *all* morality as subjective or as a form of moral ideology, distorting our understanding of ourselves and of our society. A lot of morality does just that and should be unmasked as ideology, but it is not something which is essential to all morality everywhere, at all times. At least Engels is not claiming that and there is nothing in Engels’ text which implicitly warrants that claim.

IV

Engels next in Chapter 10 of *Anti-Dühring* turns to a discussion of equality. He first points out that there is a lot of ideological twaddle in much of our talk of equality and inequality (pp. 107–112). On the one hand, talk of mental and moral inequalities has been used ideologically to ‘justify’ “crimes of civilized robber states against backward peoples” and, on the other, contractarian talk of equality has mystified the actual hierarchical relations between people in which one class has dominated another (pp. 112 and 108–110). Indeed sometimes what in reality has been the brutal subjugation and repression of one people or class by another has been justified in the name of attaining equality. Some have decided that others are afflicted with “superstition, prejudice, brutality and perversity of character” while they, ‘the enlightened ones’, have, in the name of attaining equality, ‘adjusted’ these

malformed people (p. 112). The tides of ideology are running high, Engels claims, when equality comes to “adjustment by force” (p. 112). Some are, where such conceptions reign, to “attain equal rights through subjection” (p. 112).

However, while philosophers like Dühring have in effect made a charade out of talk of equality, nonetheless the idea itself is an extremely important one. Engels acknowledges the importance of Rousseau’s articulation of equality both theoretically and in a practical sense in the French Revolution (p. 113). “Even today”, Engels continues, it “still plays an important agitational role in the socialist movement of almost every country” (p. 113). However, it is only after we have been able to determine with greater exactitude its “scientific content” that we will be able to “determine its value for proletarian agitation” (p. 113).¹²

What is the ‘scientific content’ of equality? It is not the primeval conception that men have some common characteristics and that it is in virtue of these common characteristics that they are equal (p. 113). Rather “the modern demand for equality is something entirely different from that. . .” (p. 113). It consists in

deducing from those common characteristics of humanity, from that equality of humans as humans, a claim to equal political or social status for all human beings, or at least for all citizens of a state or all members of a society (pp. 113–114).

(Engels here should have said ‘attempting to deduce’ rather than ‘deducing’. However, it is clear from the context that he does not think any valid deduction can be made. He was speaking above in a sociological mode.) It is worth noting, however, that it took thousands of years for this modern idea, i.e. the idea that “all men should have equal rights in the state and in society”, to take hold and to come to seem “natural and self-evident” (p. 114). For millennia “women, slaves and strangers” were “excluded from this equality as a matter of course” (p. 114). It is only with the rise of the bourgeoisie that we get the modern demand for equality described above (p. 115).

Here Engels uses his conception of historical materialism to show how such a class arose and how, with the development of capitalist relations of production, such an idea of equality became historically possible and how it, in turn, helped the stabilization of such relations of production and facilitated the development of these relations of production (pp. 115–116). There was in such a cultural environment much emphasis on equal legal and political

rights, but the firmest form of equality under capitalism was that of the “equal status of human labor” (p. 116). This conception found its “unconscious but clearest expression in the law of value of modern bourgeois economics according to which the value of a commodity is measured by the socially necessary labor embodied in it” (p. 116). It is to this, Engels argues, that we should trace the modern idea of equality. In doing so we are tracing it back “to the economic conditions of bourgeois society” (p. 116). Unlike the guild restrictions of feudal society, capitalist production relations “required freedom and equality of rights”. For capitalism to flourish all artificial barriers to the development of manufacture must be done away with. However, once set in motion this demand for equality was hard to contain or circumscribe. “It was a matter of course that the demand for equality should assume a general character reaching out beyond the individual state . . .”. It was a matter of course, with this economic development, “that freedom and equality should be proclaimed as *human* rights” (p. 117). There was, of course, room for all kinds of double-mindedness here. The American Constitution, for example, was the first to recognize the rights of man, yet, as Engels put it, “in the same breath” it “confirmed the slavery of the colored races in America . . .” (p. 117). What it did was to “proscribe class privileges while sanctifying race privileges . . .” (p. 117).

However, this is not, for Engels, the full story of equality or the only thing that the development of the forces of production was bringing into being. As the burghers of the feudal period “developed into a class of modern society, it was always and inevitably accompanied by its shadow, the proletariat” (p. 117). And, as there emerged a bourgeois demand for equality, so too there emerged a proletarian demand for equality (p. 117). As Engels puts it in a famous passage:

From the moment when the bourgeois demand for the abolition of class *privileges* was put forward, alongside of it appeared the proletarian demand for the abolition of the *classes themselves* – at first in religious form, basing itself on primitive Christianity, and later drawing support from the bourgeois equalitarian theories themselves. The proletarians took the bourgeoisie at their word: equality must not be merely apparent, must not apply merely to the sphere of the state, but must also be real, must be extended to the social and economic sphere. And especially since the time when the French bourgeoisie, from the Great Revolution on, brought bourgeois equality to the forefront, the French proletariat has answered it blow for blow with the demand for social and economic equality, and equality has become the battle-cry particularly of the French proletariat (p. 117).

For the proletariat the demand for equality came to have a double meaning. Its first sense was that of an ideological weapon of the struggling proletariat. It was, as Engels put it, “the simple expression of the revolutionary instinct and finds its justification in that, and only in that” (p. 117). This simple expression of revolutionary instinct is “the spontaneous reaction against the crying social inequalities, against the contrast of rich and poor, the feudal lords and their serfs, surfeit and starvation . . .” (p. 117). Secondly, and very importantly, we must recognize another ideological role in the class struggle of the proletariat demand for equality. This proletarian demand for equality draws “more or less correct and more far-reaching demands from this bourgeois demand” and serves “as an agitational means in order to rouse the workers against the capitalists . . .” (p. 118). Yet it is a demand “which is made on the basis of the capitalists’ own assertions . . .” (p. 117). It does not require a *distinct* moral content or conception. It is, I take it, at least in part this that Engels has in mind when he remarks, somewhat enigmatically, that this proletarian demand “stands and falls with bourgeois equality itself” (p. 117). Presumably that means that it must (1) presuppose this bourgeois norm in order to extend itself beyond the bourgeois demand and (2) that it is causally dependent on that demand since it arises from it and (3) that if the bourgeois demand is not justified it is not justified.

Now, as the ‘scientific content’ of the demand for *bourgeois* equality is the demand that the value of a commodity, any commodity, including labor-power, be measured by the socially necessary labor embodied in it, so the scientific content of the *proletarian* demand for equality, taking into consideration both of its meanings, is “*the demand for the abolition of classes*” (p. 118, italics mine). Engels adds, in a remark that is vital for an understanding of a socialist conception of equality, “Any demand for equality *which goes beyond that of necessity passes into absurdity*” (p. 118). Engels appears, at least, to have contradicted himself in these passages. He first says that proletarian conceptions of equality have the same content as bourgeois ones and then says they have a different content, i.e. the demand for the abolition of classes. What I think he should have said, and what he seems at least to intend, is that they have a similar content, a content that is both rendered more determinate and is extended as proletarian class consciousness develops. As the social formation distinctive of Communism is consolidated, equality would come to have a quite different content. It would come to mean the attainment of a thorough classlessness.

Engels concludes Chapter 10 of *Anti-Dühring* by relating this talk of equality to his earlier critique of self-evident, eternally true moral ideas and to his historical-materialist methodology (p. 118). We need to recognize that the idea of equality, whether in its bourgeois or proletarian forms, is not an eternal truth or an axiomatic truth (p. 118). They are rather both historical products, brought about by historical conditions “which in turn themselves presuppose a long previous historical development” (p. 118). That in one sense or another equality is taken by the general public with the development of capitalism to be almost a self-evident axiomatic truth does not at all show that it is anything of the kind.¹³ Rather – and here Engels is very much a child of the Enlightenment – it is the “result of the general diffusion and the continued appropriateness of the ideas of the eighteenth century” (p. 118). This remark, interestingly, is both empirical and sociological (he speaks of ‘the general diffusion’) and normative (he speaks of ‘the continued appropriateness’).

v

I have now completed my characterization of the central places where Engels speaks of moral ideas and morality in *Anti-Dühring*: to wit Chapters 1, 9 and 10. I shall turn in this section to some further scattered remarks in *Anti-Dühring* where he speaks of liberty and its relation to equality.

In the context of discussing liberty, Engels, fitting well with his overall Enlightenment orientation and his sense of how societies historically develop, remarks that “English law with its quite exceptional developments” has safeguarded “personal liberty to an extent unknown anywhere on the Continent” (p. 124). In talking of liberty and freedom, Engels did not mean to deny the truth of determinism. He develops what would now be called a compatibilist position on the ‘free will controversy’, though it is a compatibilism with a very Hegelian and ultimately a Spinozist flavor. “Freedom is the appreciation of necessity.” We are unfree to the extent that we do not understand the ways the laws of nature and society work. “Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends” (p. 125). Against the indeterminist, Engels argues that “freedom . . . consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature which is founded on knowledge of natural necessity” (p. 125). This self-mastery

increases as our knowledge increases and is plainly “a product of historical development”. The ‘freedom’ of the indeterminist (incompatibilist), even if it were possible, would be no genuine freedom at all. A decision made in uncertainty and founded on ignorance – “an arbitrary choice among many different and conflicting possible decisions” – shows “precisely that it is not free” (p. 125). Rather, ‘freedom of the will’, if it means anything at all, “means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with real knowledge of the subject” (p. 125). We have that capacity and with the development of science and the forces of production generally, we have an ever greater opportunity to exercise that freedom. “The first men who separated themselves from the animal kingdom were in all essentials as unfree as the animals themselves, but each step forward in civilization was a step towards freedom” (pp. 125–26). It is, in Engels’ view, the extensive development of “powerful productive forces” which

alone makes *possible* a state of society in which there are no longer class distinctions or anxiety over the means of subsistence for the individual, and in which for the first time there can be talk of real human freedom . . . (p. 126).

Here we have a crucial claim for Marxism and for egalitarianism. Liberty and equality are tightly linked. Liberty, the control over ourselves and over external nature, is always a matter of degree, but, for it to flourish, it requires the development of the productive forces. Until scarcity is overcome, nature tamed and general social wealth is considerable, freedom cannot be extensive. It cannot, without such social wealth, except perhaps for a few, flourish to the fullest extent possible. It is also the case that freedom will not flourish until there are no longer class distinctions. Until, that is, there is no longer a situation in which one group of people in very crucial ways can coerce others. But this means that liberty requires equality. Indeed, Engels is making the striking claim that it goes both ways: *liberty requires equality and equality requires liberty*. The real content of equality is classlessness, but there can be no human freedom for all without classlessness, for without classlessness some will always be in the control of others. So equality cannot exist without liberty and extensive liberty, liberty for all (the ideals of the French revolution), can only exist with equality (classlessness).

NOTES

- ¹ The central work here is his *Anti-Dühring*, though there are scattered references throughout his work to ethics, moralizing and moral theory. References to *Anti-Dühring* will be given in the text and the page citations will be to an English translation. Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, translated by Emile Burns, New York, International Publishers, 1939.
- ² There is a natural tendency to be very wary of talk of 'scientific socialism'. Andrew Collier in his masterful 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values' shows how skepticism here can be dispelled and how much good sense can be made of this scientific sounding notion. Andrew Collier, 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values', in *Marx and Morality*, Kai Nielsen and Steven C. Patten (eds.), Guelph, Ontario, Canadian Association for Publishing in Philosophy, 1981, pp. 121–154.
- ³ See here Ted Benton, 'Natural Science and Cultural Struggle: Engels and Philosophy and the Natural Sciences', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol. II, edited by John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, Sussex, England, 1979, pp. 101–142 and Terrell Carver, 'Marx, Engels and Dialectics', *Political Studies* XXVIII (1980), 353–363. See also his *Engels*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981.
- ⁴ Terrell Carver, 'Marx, Engels and Dialectics' and Roy Edgley, 'Marx's Revolutionary Science', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol. III, John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (eds.), Sussex, England, 1979, pp. 5–26.
- ⁵ Benton sees Engels as setting out a non-speculative metaphysics and ontology. It is, as he puts it, based in "some as yet undefined sense" on "scientific knowledge". Indeed, he sees "Engels' ontology" as "the product of philosophical reflection on what is presupposed by the recent development of the sciences". Benton, 'Natural Science and Cultural Struggle', p. 125. I think Engels' description of what he is doing here is innocuous enough but in some of his practice about the 'dialectics of nature' he was doing the kind of speculative work that he, in his programmatic statements, wisely eschewed. For a contrast between Engels and Marx here see Terrell Carver, 'Marx, Engels and Dialectics'.
- ⁶ George G. Brenkert, 'Marx, Engels and the Relativity of Morals', *Studies in Soviet Thought* 17 (1977), 201–224. See also Andrew Collier, 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values'.
- ⁷ Contrast here Allen Wood, 'Marx and Equality', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol. IV, John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben (eds.), Harvester Press, Sussex, England, 1981, pp. 195–220. I intend on some other occasion to argue that Wood both underplays the importance of conceptions of equality in the work of Marx and Engels and underplays its importance in social life.
- ⁸ Contrast here Marxist anti-moralism. See Andrew Collier, 'Truth and Practice', *Radical Philosophy* 5 (1973); 'The Production of Moral Ideology', *Radical Philosophy* 9 (1974); 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values' and see, as well, Anthony Skillen, 'Marxism and Morality', *Radical Philosophy* 8 (1974), 'Workers' Interests and the Proletarian Ethic; Conflicting Strains in Marxian Anti-Moralism', in *Marx and Morality* and A. Skillen, *Ruling Illusions*, Harvester, Sussex, England, 1977, pp. 122–177.
- ⁹ But what moral progress comes to requires a reading. It may not be as straightforward as it seems in Engels' work. See here Brenkert, *op. cit.*, pp. 215–219.
- ¹⁰ Brenkert, mistakenly I believe, thinks it justifies it as well. *Ibid.*, pp. 210–12 and 219–221.

¹¹ This sentence indicates that Engels, however unwittingly, was committed to what is now called cognitivism in ethics.

¹² Engels' mode of speech sounds overly scientific. It would perhaps be better if he substituted 'factual content' or 'rational content' for 'scientific content'.

¹³ In our time, as the neo-conservative reaction exhibits (e.g., Kristol, Nozick, Hayek, Friedman, Flew and Nisbet), it is no longer generally thought to be even true, let alone self-evident.

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