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ON THE POVERTY OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY:  
RUNNING A BIT WITH THE TUCKER-WOOD THESIS

I

In their much discussed accounts of Marx and morality, Robert Tucker and Allen Wood freely admit that Marx regards capitalism as an intolerable exploitative social system.<sup>1</sup> (II 267) Wood, whose views will take the brunt of my discussion here, adds that Marx in making this evaluation, standing where he did at a distinctive point in history and speaking of that period in the development of capitalism and implicitly of our own period as well, does not trouble to specify the “norms, standards or values he employs” in making that harsh and unequivocal denunciation. (II 267) Tucker and Wood both recognize that it is very natural to conclude, as indeed many people have, including many socialist militants, that one of the things Marx plainly thought was that capitalism is grossly unjust. It exploits and robs people, so plainly it must be an unjust social system. Tucker and Wood maintain, as does Richard Miller as well, (*pace* George Husami, G. A. Cohen and Gary Young) that appearances here are deceiving and that while Marx firmly believed that capitalism is dehumanizing and exploitative and indeed an intolerable socio-economic system that should be overthrown, he did not believe it to be an unjust system.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if we come to understand the function of moral conceptions and how socio-economic systems work, we will not appraise capitalism in terms of its justice or injustice at all. The capitalist apologist can call his system just if he wants to, but for someone who understands what is going on, for someone with a sophisticated sociology of morals, there will be the recognition that this is just a bit of moral ideology with no rational or critical force. But, Tucker and Wood also argue, it is important as well to recognize that the socialist who says that capitalism is unjust will be doing essentially the same thing as the capitalist apologist. And that, they maintain, is hardly a rational way to critique capitalism. Marx, they believe, did not think that capitalism should be appraised in these terms at all.

Tucker and Wood realize that this, at first blush at least, is a very paradoxical thesis; they want to dispell the paradox and to make clear how Marx could quite consistently “deny that capitalism is unjust while at the same time calling for its revolutionary overthrow”. (I 245) They wish to argue, as Wood puts it, that “the attainment of justice does not, in itself, play a significant role in either Marxian theory or practice”. (I 245) However, Wood in particular is also concerned to argue that both Marx and Engels “did take seriously the concept of justice” and that it “did have a place” in “their conception of society and social practice”. (I 245) He maintains that both Marx and Engels regarded the concept of justice as an ideological notion with a functional, system-supporting rationale. Indeed, he claims, as many have, that for Marx and Engels all distinctively moral notions are taken to be ideological. Morality for Marx and Engels is always moral ideology.<sup>3</sup> (II 290–1, 194)

It is hardly in dispute that both Marx and Engels were critical of morality’s mystifying ideological employments both by bourgeois intelligentsia and by socialists such as Lassalle and Proudhon. Marx and Engels sought to expose morality’s ideological employment and in doing this to show the role it plays in social life. Tucker and Wood wish (a) perspicuously to display what Marx and Engels took to be its employment and (b) to show clearly why Marx and Engels did not believe that capitalism, or any other whole socio-economic system, could in any critical sense be properly said to be unjust and, relatedly, why they also believed it was impossible to make valid trans-historical assessments of the justice of whole social institutions or modes of production. It would, on Marx’ account, be impossible to make coherent comparative judgements of the justice or lack thereof of capitalist or socialist societies.

For Marx, Wood has it, a transaction is just if it harmonizes with the prevailing productive mode and unjust if it conflicts with the prevailing productive mode. The crucial thing to see is that the justice or injustice of an economic transaction depends on the prevailing mode of production. (II 268) Marx himself focuses, in speaking of justice, on economic transactions, but, Wood believes, “the account he gives is general enough to apply to actions, social institutions and even to legal and political structures”. (I 255) There is no such thing, on Marx’ account,

as ‘natural justice’ or ‘natural rights’ or anything like a ‘fair wage’. The justice of economic “transactions is only a matter of their correspondence to the prevailing productive mode”. (II 270) For Marx, on Wood’s reading, the concept of justice does not connote, as it does for liberals, a rightful balance between conflicting interests but is “the rational measure of social acts and institutions from the juridical point of view”. (I 273) Any rights or entitlements we have are role relative. And the roles we have are determined by the mode of production of the society in which we live. To recognize this is not to deny that in class societies “the administration of juridical relations will normally involve some mode of dealing with the antagonistic interests generated by the contradictions inherent in the mode of production”. (I 273) But this is not to speak, except in ways which are relative to that mode of production and its rationale, about what would or would not constitute a rightful balance between the conflicting interests.<sup>4</sup> (I 273) Thus, it should be evident why for Marx justice is not and cannot be a genuinely revolutionary idea or even a critical emancipatory norm. As Wood puts it, “the revolutionary who is captivated by the passion for justice misunderstands, in the Marxian view, both the existing production relations and his own revolutionary aspirations”. (I 271)

This view, Wood claims, is the view of the mature Marx — the post-1843 Marx. While Wood, quite rightly, I believe, does not want, à la Louis Althusser, to draw a sharp distinction between the work of the early and the late Marx, he does believe that in Marx’ understanding of the role of moral concepts generally and of justice in particular there was a major shift from his early position, where his critique of capitalism was morally based, to his mature (post-1843) view. It is this later view Wood is concerned to elucidate. And it is this view in which there is no moral critique of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> (II 288) So even if there are passages in the 1843 essays — the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and *On the Jewish Question* — which do express “a morally based critique of capitalism”, the “absence of any similar passages from his later writings and Marx’ consistent disparagement of morally based social criticism”, provides strong evidence, Wood claims, that Marx changed his views on this matter as he developed his materialist conception of history and his “interpretation of morality as a social phenomenon”. (II 288) Marx believed that if

workers come to have a reasonable understanding of their own interests and needs they will come to see that, quite apart from any sense of obligation or guilt or love of justice or virtue, they have reason enough to favor both the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. Moreover, after 1843, Marx, Wood claims, “consistently avoids social criticism based on moral goods or norms, and consistently exhibits an attitude of suspicion and hostility toward those who do engage in such criticism”. (II 288) He, for example, turned his ire on poor Adolph Wagner who had tried sympathetically to treat Marx as “putting forward a critique of capitalism which is morally based”. (II 289)

## II

On Wood’s reading, it is not just the concept of justice which should be so understood but all distinctively moral notions.<sup>6</sup> He remarks in his response to Husami and George Brenkert that all moral standards are for Marx “determined by the requirements of the prevailing mode of production and not by the pursuit of the greatest non-moral good, be it happiness, freedom or self-realization”. (II 284) As Wood reads him, Marx, like Nietzsche, is a critic of morality. Marx is not someone articulating a moral theory or a moral vision of his own. He is not someone, like Kant or Sidgwick, attempting to give the rational foundations for the moral point of view and he is not even someone trying to articulate a new moral point of view. Instead, like Nietzsche, “he seeks to understand the actual function in human life of moral rules and standards, and to make an assessment of these on the basis of non-moral goods”. (II 286) Wood believes that Marx sees morality exclusively as *moral ideology* and reveals an “abstemious and even contemptuous attitude toward the use of moral norms and values (such as right and justice) in the criticism or defense of basic social arrangements themselves”. (II 289–90)

Marx, Wood argues, believes that with moral ideas, as with religious ones, once we have an adequate historical-materialist explanation of their origin and their actual functioning, once we see how their content and form is determined by the mode of production and how they tend to answer to the interests of the dominant class, we will, where that is

kept firmly in mind and taken to heart, no longer be in thrall to them. (II 290)

It is not that Marx commits the genetic fallacy as John Anderson and a host of others believe.<sup>7</sup> Marx never says that a belief is true merely because it is a socialist or proletarian one or false merely because it is an aristocratic or bourgeois belief. But he does say that when, using the methodology of historical materialism, we gain an understanding of how social systems actually function, we will come to see that “the only rational function” of moral ideas “is to support a particular social order and to serve as a mask for class interests”. (II 290) When we clearly see this, and take it to heart, we will be liberated from the moral point of view. We will come to see morality for what it is, namely as *moral ideology*, and we will no longer think it important to make an appeal to principles of right and justice. It is sufficient, to give us both revolutionary motivation and a guide to the direction socialist reconstruction had best take, to understand the interests and needs of the proletariat and the way the present organization of society frustrates them, and, with its forms of imposed consciousness, suppresses a recognition on the part of the workers of what their interests are and of what they must do to achieve their emancipation.

It is better, the Tucker-Wood thesis argues, from Marx’ point of view to critique capitalism in terms of its rational content than to engage in ideology oneself and to trade moral ideology against moral ideology. Since no moral ideology has any rational foundation, such a move, such engagement in moral ideology, particularly given the capitalist dominance in the consciousness industry, is more likely to discredit socialism than to strengthen it. People, where we have such a moralized defense of socialism, are likely to come to think they have just switched churches. Instead of the old familiar one we have a new unfamiliar one. What we need to see is that arguments about what is just and what is right have no rational content which is independent of the modes of production. Talk of validity here can only have ideological force; “new standards”, on Marx’ view, “come to be valid because revolutionary changes occur in economic relations . . .” (II 294) There is, and can be, no antecedent recognition of them as valid or rational principles that rational contractors, with a sense of justice and a full understanding of the ‘laws of human society’, would choose, and thereby, in that very

act of choice, sanction as valid in an initial state of liberty and equality in a hypothetical state of nature.

### III

Not surprisingly this account of Marx on justice has received a not inconsiderable amount of sustained criticism.<sup>8</sup> It is upsetting to received views — both on the right and on the left — of what Marx and Engels were about. Wood has responded with a vigorous defense and William MacBride and Derek Allen have defended such an account as well.<sup>9</sup> Whatever else we may want to say concerning this controversy, we can safely say this: if we follow this debate at all carefully and try to probe it critically, and in so probing it return to Marx' and Engels' texts, we will gain an enhanced awareness of the complexity of the issue and a far clearer view of what Marx and Engels did think about justice and why. That much at least will be gained from the discussion. But in addition I think we also will gain an enriched understanding of what justice is and how morality functions. Because of such considerations, I have taken the rather conventional road of first setting out the Tucker-Wood thesis in some detail. I shall in what follows add some more vital detail, though in doing this I shall also in effect probe the Tucker-Wood thesis as I proceed. I shall conclude by arguing that even if the Tucker-Wood functionalist account of Marx on justice, and morality more generally, has got Marx exactly right this need not have the the counter-intuitive features *vis-à-vis* Marx' evident condemnation of capitalism that it is usually thought to have. There can be morality without moral theory or moral foundations and that can be perfectly available to Marx, particularly since he did not take his remarks about morality being ideology to be epistemological remarks. I shall concentrate on Wood's account in setting out the Tucker-Wood thesis, for it is the most developed and nuanced. Moreover, as I remarked above, Wood has responded with vigour to some of this critics. To examine the detail of his dispute with Husami and Brenkert is very revealing indeed and it is also worth considering whether there are the resources within his account for plausibly meeting the probing criticisms of Young, Alan Buchanan and Nancy Holmestrom.<sup>10</sup>

John Rawls believes (to start at this indirectly) that social justice is

the first virtue of institutions. It is the fundamental thing we must come to grips with in assessing social institutions. Wood, in effect, attempts to show how radically Marx' view contrasts with Rawls' — a view which in our culture in the above general respect is the closest thing we have to an 'orthodox view', at least among social philosophers. "The concept of justice", as Wood well puts it, "has traditionally played an important role in theories of the rational assessment of social institutions. It is commonly felt that justice is the highest merit any social institution can possess, while injustice is the gravest charge which could ever be lodged against it". (I 245) Marx and Engels recognized that this was the common picture and attempted, Wood argues, to show why this common view is an ideological mystification.

For Marx, according to Wood, justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) is "fundamentally a juridical or legal (*rechtlich*) concept, a concept related to the law (*Recht*) and to the rights (*Rechte*) men have under it". (I 246) *If* we take a juridical point of view, *if* we accept the supremacy and the legitimate authority of law and the state for regulating the lives of human beings, then (a) the concepts of right and justice are for us the highest rational standards by which laws, social institutions and human actions can be judged, and (b) the very "concept of justice" is "the highest expression of the rationality of social facts . . ." (I 254) As juridical concepts (*Rechtsbegriffe*), right and justice, are concepts whose proper function is in the moral and legal institutions of society, what Marx calls its 'juridical relations' (*Rechtsverhältnisse*). However, for Marx, given his historical materialism, they are part of the superstructure. They, Wood argues, must be the juridical expression of a society's production relations.

With this before our minds, Wood simply reminds us of a fundamental tenet of historical materialism, to wit: that in "any given society, the actual content of juridical relations, and hence of the juridical norms which regulate them, is determined by the society's production relations which in turn correspond to the state of development of its 'productive power' (*Produktivkräfte*)". (II 268) In fine, Marx, as a historical materialist, will not grant such traditional supremacy and autonomy to the juridical point of view and to justice — a supremacy and autonomy that Rawls and Nozick as well as J. S. Mill and John Locke just routinely assume. Legal and moral notions are superstruc-

tural notions which, while they can and typically do, affect the relations of production — the economic structure of society — are fundamentally dependent on the relations of production, relations which determine their fundamental character. These relations of production, the totality of which is the economic system, are in turn determined by the forces of production dominant at the time. So, on such a Marxist conception, the traditional point of view (exemplified powerfully in our time by John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin) is mistaken. State and law, and the concepts of justice and right that go with the law, are superstructural conceptions of derivative and dependent reality and import. This is not to deny that human beings are rational creatures — creatures who sometimes have a reasonable understanding of their own interests and how best to achieve them — and creatures who find work an essential life activity. With these capacities, we, viewing ourselves now as a society, develop our productive forces. We are also social animals and human society is a “developing system of collective productive activity aimed at the satisfaction of historically conditioned human needs”. (I 247) Our work activity is purposive and we subject nature to our will. “At a given point in human history, men are possessed of determinate methods and capacities for subjecting nature to their will . . .” (I 248) These are the productive forces of society and they are the prime, though not the sole, determinants of the general course of human history. The particular productive forces we possess are inherited from previous generations. We are not free to choose the degree to which we have mastery over nature at a given stage in human history, but, being rational creatures with needs and interests, we can and do develop those productive forces, though, because we are not free to choose our own productive forces just as we will, we are not free to choose our production relations or legal systems or moral systems either, though this does not mean that we cannot to some extent alter and develop these various institutions. However, their main extent and direction of development will be determined by the development of the productive forces.

We should also recognize that human productive activity not only transforms nature, it also transforms human nature. In saying this, we do not at all need to deny the point made by G. A. Cohen and John McMurtry that there are universal features of human nature which



remain in spite of the transformations.<sup>11</sup> But human nature is also, to a very considerable degree, malleable. And with the way human beings produce, they change, within limits, how they live and respond, what they want and aspire to, and indeed even in part what their needs are. Human beings inherit, through specific processes of historical development, certain productive forces of a determinate type. Starting with these and their corresponding relations of production, the totality of which is their economic structure, humans produce “by adopting determinate modes of collective activity, modes which in turn act upon them and change them”. (I 249) We satisfy our needs by our productive activity but at the same time, as the activity progresses, we produce new forms of activity and new needs. Productive activity consists in many inter-dependent factors: productive forces, production relations, human needs, and characteristic forms of social and cultural life. Such a historically conditional social whole is called by Marx *a mode of production (Produktionsweise)*. Our very ways of responding, feeling, conceptualizing, our very self-images and ways of acting — much of our human nature — changes with changes in the mode of production. And this, of course, is profoundly true of our conceptions of justice and of morality generally. They are, Wood stresses, through and through, dependent phenomena. Wood puts it this way: “Legal institutions owe their existence and their form to the mode of production within which they operate”. (I 252) Social production for Marx is the true basis of all society. It provides the basis for human emancipation. When human productive activity develops itself beyond its capitalistic forms and the limiting regularity of political life in class divided societies, the universal character of man’s co-operative labour and its foundation for human reciprocity, solidarity and fraternity will gradually become apparent to us. But this true basis of all society cannot become generally apparent to human beings until the productive forces are so developed that the basis is laid for a new form of *Gemeinwesen* (co-operative community), a form of human association that humankind has not seen since its near infancy. Such co-operative communities are societies rooted in a common ownership and control of the means of production. Such a *Gemeinwesen* will not require a *Staatsrecht*, a political authority, with a coercive legal system with a norm of justice taken, by the ideologically mystified, as Engels puts it, as “the fundamental principle of all society

... the standard by which to measure all human things ... the final judge to be appealed to in all conflicts".<sup>12</sup> Such a juridical norm is on both Marx' and Engels' view only appropriate to a certain type of society with a certain mode of production. It, they claim, will be entirely foreign to the *Gemeinwesen* that the future Communist society will be. The state, we should not forget, is principally, if not exclusively, "an expression, a determination, of the prevailing mode of production, and represents the interests of the dominant class. It has, inextricably linked to it, a juridical system and it, of course, reflects in its official pronouncements this juridical point of view. The "conceptions of right and justice which express this point of view are", Wood contends Marx contends, "rationally comprehensible only when seen in their proper connection with other determinations of social life and are grasped in terms of their role within the prevailing productive mode". (I 254)

Marx maintains in the third volume of *Capital* that just transactions are those which correspond to the mode of production "adequate to the transaction".<sup>13</sup> He "views", as Wood puts it, "the concept of justice in terms of its function within a given mode of production". (I 256) Just transactions fit the prevailing mode of production and serve a purpose relative to it. They in various ways support and reinforce the prevailing economic structure. The rational validity of claims of justice and right are in reality determined by how well they perform that reinforcing function, though they are not, of course, viewed in that way by someone under the sway of the ideology appropriate to those forces. They are felt rather to have some altogether obscure but still rational basis either as pure norms of practical reason, mysterious rational necessities, natural laws or fundamental intuitions. But, in Marx' view, the real *raison d'être* of juridical institutions and concepts can be understood only from the more "comprehensive vantage point of the historical mode of production they both participate in and portray". (I 256) Justice is not a standard in accordance with which reason — pure, practical or otherwise — can measure whether a society is humane or even well-ordered. Rather it is a standard whereby someone who accepts the propriety of a particular mode of production can make assessments of the fairness of the distribution of and availability of benefits and burdens within such a mode of production once the acceptability of its determinate relations of production is taken as given.

(I 257) There neither are nor can there be any principles of justice “applicable to any and all forms of society”. (I 257) We cannot say anything is *per se* unjust, neither slavery, exploitation nor usury. Under an ancient slave-owning mode of production, one man owning another could be right and not unjust while in a feudal or capitalist form it would indeed be unjust, but what we cannot properly do is say which social form is the more or less just *sans phrase* and we cannot make any absolute or even objective pronouncements on the injustice of slavery or the extraction of surplus value *per se*, apart from that it would be just under a given mode of production though not under another. All such judgements are mode of production relative. (I 257) There are no formal or abstract principles of justice à la Sidgwick or Mill which have a determinate substantive content and apply to all times and places and perhaps are determined “by a universal compatibility of human acts and interests”. (I 257) Such principles, abstracted from concrete historical contexts, are empty and useless. (I 257) In determining what is just and unjust, it is a mistake to seek principles of justice which hold *sub-specie aeternitatis* and to treat “the concrete context of an act or institution as accidental, inessential, a mere occasion for the pure rational form to manifest itself”. (I 257) Such rationalistic moral thinking deflects our attention away from a recognition of the fact that the justice or rightness of an institution can be nothing more than the contextually determined concrete suitability of a given type of situation to a determinate productive mode. (I 257) Moreover, though there will often be a coincidence between an action or institution being just because it fits in properly with a determinate mode of production and its answering to the interests of a ruling class, still Marx does not, Wood maintains, give any sort of utilitarian or other consequentialist rationale for justice. (I 258–9) He indeed sometimes makes utilitarian arguments, but not for justice. He does not, that is, attempt to provide a utilitarian role for justice claims.

Marx’ account of justice is a relativist or contextualist one, Wood argues, in the sense that it denies that there is a standard of justice or right which is higher than that of the standard determined by the extant mode of production. But it is not relativist, Wood points out, in the perhaps more fundamental sense, that Marx believes that there are or can be certain kinds of fundamental conflicts or disagreements between

peoples, cultures, or epochs about whether certain specific actions are or would be right or wrong, just or unjust, and concerning which there is no “rational way of resolving such disagreements, no possible ‘correct answer’ to them”. (I 259) The Marxist answer is not relativist in that sense. If a historical analysis of slavery shows that it played a necessary role in that prevailing mode of production, then the Marxian view would be that, where such a mode of production obtains, then it is objectively the case that in such a society slavery is just, though it would not be just in another society with a different mode of production. But that something else would be just in that society is also objectively determinable. That, in the above crucial sense, is no more relativist than it is relativist to say that if you are going to a tropical rain forest you ought to get malaria shots though you should not do so if you are going to Brandon, Manitoba. To try coherently to assert that slavery in classical Greece was unjust would be a comparable kind of mistake, though it would not be a mistake to deny that under capitalism slavery is just or to deny that it was just under feudalism. (I 259—260)

Justice, for Marx, on the Tucker-Wood reading, is not, as we have remarked, a revolutionary or critical conception. The Marxist who is driven into socialist *praxis* by his passion for justice is confused both about his own revolutionary aspirations and about Marxist theory. By appealing to and being guided by conceptions of right and justice, he gives us to understand that his protest against the prevailing mode of production is a protest against evils which can and should be “remedied by moral, legal or political processes which in fact are only dependent moments of that mode of production itself”. (I 271) Within that mode of production, the actual production and distribution relations are sociologically and economically speaking neither arbitrary nor accidental. But, Tucker and Wood would have it, there is no ideal juridical structure — no ideal system of justice and rights — which can be stated apart from any determinate mode of production which will give us the ideal design of a just society. Wood’s conclusion is that “Marx’s call to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist production therefore is not, and cannot be, founded on the claim that capitalism is unjust”. (I 271) That is not what Marx’ critique of capitalism is based on. To so translate it is to distort Marx’ argument and to base it on what Marx, quite consistently, would have regarded as a mistaken, ideologically mystified, form. (I 272)

Marx was thoroughly convinced, Wood maintains, that talk of justice and talk of making distribution fairer would be distracting and both ideologically pacifying and mystifying in a situation in which the proletariat finds itself in the demanding circumstance where a revolutionary transformation of society is actually on the historical agenda, a transformation, which centrally involved a replacement of the old mode of production by a socialist one. Moral theorizing is not what we need here. Getting clearer about our moral condition is not what will thoroughly transform society and life and lift the social curse which holds back proletarian emancipation and through it human emancipation more generally. In attacking the rhetoric of justice, Marx' deepest worry in this context was that such a distributive orientation presupposed a mistaken theory of society and that, if such ideas became current, they could very well, through spreading false notions about the "defects of capitalism and the conditions for their removal", delay the socialist transformation of society and make it more painful. (I 274)

#### IV

The question naturally arises, if Marx did not criticize capitalism as unjust, why then did Marx condemn capitalism, for condemn it he did? (I 275) Wood discusses this in part IV of his 'The Marxian Critique of Justice' and again in his reply to Husami.

Wood begins by remarking that

it would be extremely naive to suppose that there could be any single simple answer to such a question. The only genuine answer to it is Marx's comprehensive theory of capitalism as a concrete historical mode of production; for it was as a whole that Marx condemned capitalism and his condemnation was based on what he believed was a unified and essentially complete analysis of its inner workings and its position in human history. (I 275)

Wood argues plausibly that Marx' own reasons for condemning capitalism are contained in his comprehensive theory of the historical genesis, the organic functioning, and the prognosis of the capitalist mode of production. (I 281) He does not believe that in so arguing Marx commits himself to any moral theory or moral philosophy — there is not even an implicit moral theory in Marx that we might rationally reconstruct and give a fine tuning to — and he does not, Wood has it,

regard the articulation and defense of some particular moral principles as such as essential for conducting his case. Marx' critique of capitalism, at least as far as his post-1843 work is concerned, is not, Wood claims, rooted in "any particular moral or social ideal or principle". (I 281) Marx, like a Kantian, objected vigorously to the servitude and exploitation endemic to capitalism because it treated human beings as means only rather than as ends in themselves. He also thought that the overthrow of capitalism would in the long run bring about greater happiness to more people and in so reasoning some have claimed him for utilitarianism.<sup>14</sup> Still others have seen in Marx' hope for an expansion of man's powers under socialism an implicit endorsement of a self-realizationist or perfectionist moral theory.<sup>15</sup> But it is perfectly possible to object to the treatment of human beings as mere means without being a Kantian, value human happiness without being a utilitarian, and favor the development of human powers and capacities without being committed to a self-realizationist or perfectionist theory or any other particular moral theory. These various theories have stressed the primacy of these things and Marx does, on occasion, appeal to such moral considerations. But that in itself is not sufficient to classify him as being any of these things or as inconsistently vacillating between these distinctive moral philosophies or as espousing any moral *philosophy* at all. If I believe that the achievement of human happiness is a good thing this is not sufficient to make me a utilitarian. In fact, while this may not be flattering to the self-image of moral philosophers, moral philosophy, on Marx' view, is, at best, a decidedly ancillary activity. It has no major role to play in the critique of capitalism. It is not that Marx' account of the functioning of capitalism, its historical genesis, organic functioning and the prognosis for its decline and fall is merely or purely descriptive in the rather artificial sense of 'descriptive' made familiar to us by non-cognitivists, where we are given to understand that it is thoroughly puzzling and indeed deeply questionable how or even that any fact, something characterized in purely descriptive language, could ever be a reason for condemning anything so described. Wood could, and probably would, agree with Isaiah Berlin and John Collier that this is an absurd view. However, as Wood well puts it, for Marx: "There is nothing problematic about saying that disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude, economic instability, and declining

productivity are features of a productive system which constitute good reasons for condemning it". (I 281—2)

Marx never tries to give a philosophical account of why such things are good reasons for condemning a system that possesses them. He could and should on my view take a Moorean turn here and claim that a philosophical account which could *not* show why these features are good reasons for condemning a system would thereby reveal its inadequacy. Such reasons just are good reasons for condemning a social system and it would be more reasonable to reject a philosophical account that told us they were after all not good reasons for condemning a social system than to believe that these were not good reasons. This is exactly parallel to the somewhat reconstructed Moorean turn that it would be more reasonable to reject a philosophical account which gave us what appeared to be air-tight arguments for believing time is unreal or that there are no physical objects than to believe that after all time really is unreal and there actually are no physical objects.

For people who like playing these sorts of games, it might be good fun to see if they could, in some non-question-begging way, show why socially unnecessary exploitation and unnecessary servitude are reasons for condemning a social system which has those features. But Marx had better things to do and he would be perfectly justified in believing those reasons are good reasons for condemning a social system whatever information philosophers might be able to provide him about why they are or are not good reasons. As Wood puts it: "No special appeal to philosophical principles, moral imperatives or evaluative modes of consciousness would be needed to show that his own reasons for condemning capitalism were good and sufficient ones". (I 282)

In speaking of Marx' convictions here Wood remarks interestingly: "that he was correct in these convictions is indicated by the fact that no serious defender of capitalism has ever disputed his critique solely on the grounds of moral philosophy". (I 282) It has been attacked on grounds of conceptual coherency or the adequacy of its economic, historical and sociological base, on its scientific methodology and the like. "But", as Wood appropriately ends his first essay, "no one has ever denied that capitalism, understood as Marx' theory understands it, is a system of unnecessary servitude, replete with irrationalities and ripe for destruction. Still less has anyone defended capitalism by claiming that a

system of this sort might after all be good or desirable, and it is doubtful that any moral philosophy which could support such a claim would deserve serious consideration". (I 282)

The serious dispute between socialists and capitalists is over social science, human nature, the functioning of capitalism and what kind of alternatives can replace it. Here moral philosophy plays a very secondary role indeed. The deep conflict between Marxists and bourgeois theoreticians lies not in their moral conceptions or normative standards but in their conceptions of social science and the role of ideology in social life. Marx tries to cut through ideology and reveal to us a process which is hidden from our eyes as we go about our daily lives in bourgeois society. He shows us the domination and servitude that is endemic to capitalism. But we need not go beyond, if you will, 'bourgeois morals' to recognise that it is wrong to dominate people, to keep them in servitude and to exploit them. The serious dispute, or at least the most serious dispute, is about what is really happening, what is necessary at a given time, what is unavoidable and about what is ideological mystification and what is not. But this is principally a dispute in and over social science and not in or over moral philosophy. Philosophical analysis can play some minor, initial classificatory role here, but that under-labourer's role will be a rather minor one, though sometimes, if it is done by someone who knows something about social life, it is of some use. But, more typically, systematic normative ethics and meta-ethics are more likely simply to get in the way of a serious coming to grips with these issues.

Marx tried to show us what our social life is like, how it got to be like that and what it could and very likely would become and he tried, with his critique of ideology, to expose "false appearances treated as real by bourgeois social science".<sup>16</sup> This fundamental critique of capitalism was by no means indifferent to moral considerations but it did not require or need the services of moral philosophy. And this will remain so even if the Tucker-Wood thesis about the functionalist and utterly mode-of-production-relative conception of justice is mistaken and that we, as G. A. Cohen, John Elster and Norman Geras believe, can reasonably impute a belief in trans-historical justice to Marx.<sup>17</sup> Moral beliefs do not a moral theory make. They do not even establish the need for one.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The 'vintage' references here are to Robert Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, New York, Norton, 1969, Chapter 2 and to Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press, 1961, pp. 11–27 and to Allen W. Wood, 'The Marxian Critique of Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1 (1972–3) and Allen W. Wood 'Marx on Right and Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* Vol. 8 (1978–9). Tucker has not turned to a re-examination of his views but Wood has in his work *Karl Marx*, (London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 125–156, his 'Marx's Immoralism', in Bernard Chavance (ed., *Marx en Perspective*, Paris, France, Editions de l'Ecole des Haute Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1985), pp. 681–698 and in his 'Justice and Class Interests', *Philosophica*, Vol. 33 No. 1 (1984), pp. 9–32. The principal references in this essay will be to the first two articles cited by Wood — the articles which have generated the most controversy. References to them will be given in the text. The first one will be referred to as (I\_\_\_\_\_, followed by the page reference) and the second article will be referred to as (II\_\_\_\_\_, followed by the page reference). All other citations will be given in the standard fashion in the end-notes.

<sup>2</sup> Ziyad I. Husami, 'Marx on Distributive Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 8 (1978–9), G. A. Cohen, 'Review of Wood's *Karl Marx*', *Mind*, Vol. XCII, No. 367 (July, 1983) and Gary Young, 'Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 8 (1978) and Gary Young, 'Doing Marx Justice', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Vol. VII, (1981). For two views in general terms siding with the Tucker-Wood thesis see Derek Allen, 'Marx and Engels On the Distributive Justice of Capitalism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Vol. VII (1981) and Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 3–97.

<sup>3</sup> This should be contrasted with Young's claim that for Marx and Engels they have both a critical and ideological function. Young, 'Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology', p. 267.

<sup>4</sup> Wood's views here differ from Tucker's. See Wood on this (I 273).

<sup>5</sup> The mature view on this counting goes back to *The Paris Manuscripts of 1844*.

<sup>6</sup> This comes out clearly in the sections on morality in his *Karl Marx* and in his 'Marx's Immoralism' and 'Justice and Class Interests', though it is also, though not flagged as much, in his earlier vintage articles.

<sup>7</sup> John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, Ltd., 1962 and in Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, Boston, Mass., Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962 and in his *Marxism and Ethics*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1969. Miller shows that we should be much more circumspect in our talk about what 'genetic fallacy' arguments do and do not show in the domain of ethics. Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, pp. 48–50.

<sup>8</sup> See the references to Husami, Young and Miller previously referred to and see as well Nancy Holmstrom, 'Exploitation', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (1977) and Allen Buchanan, *Marx and Justice*, Totowa, New Jersey, Littlefield and Adams, 1982, Steven Lukes, *Marx and Morality*, London, England, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, Norman Geras, 'On Marx and Justice', *New Left Review*, No. 150 (March/April, 1985), pp. 47–89, Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge, England, Cambridge

University Press, 1985, pp. 196—233, and G. A. Cohen's review of *Karl Marx, Mind*, Vol. XCII, No. 367 (July, 1983), pp. 442—445.

<sup>9</sup> Allen *op. cit.* and William L. McBride, 'The Concept of Justice in Marx, Engels and Others', *Ethics*, Vol. 85 (1974—5).

<sup>10</sup> Young Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology' and the previous references to Buchanan and Holmstrom.

<sup>11</sup> See John McMurtry, G. A. Cohen and Norman Geras on Marx on human nature. John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World View*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978, G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 1978 and Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: A Refutation of a Legend*, London, England, Verso, 1983.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 18, Berlin, 1959, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital III*, trans. Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1972, p. 339. For a careful elucidation of what is going on here see Allen, 'Marx and Engels On the Distributive Justice of Capitalism'.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, though he defends much of Wood's account, still gives such a utilitarian reading to Marx. For this utilitarian reading of Allen see his 'The Utilitarianism of Marx and Engels', *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 10 (1973).

<sup>15</sup> Hilliard Aronovitch, 'Marxian Morality', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 10 (1980) and George Brenkert, *Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, London, England, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Young, 'Justice and Capitalist Production: Marx and Bourgeois Ideology', p. 454.

<sup>17</sup> See the previous references to G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster and Norman Geras.

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