

7: MARX'S THEORY OF ETHICS

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I

In the history of Marxism and Marxology two kinds of interpretation of Marx can be easily distinguished. One might be called nonethical and the other ethical. I shall argue in the spirit of the latter, namely that Marx's writings have considerable ethical content that could be used as a starting point to work out a Marxist normative ethics. However at present there exists no such ethics, at least none satisfactory and worthy of Marx's name. Why?

Several reasons are usually cited and from them I can accept a political one, namely Stalinism which prevented work on the development of the true Marxist ethics. However the root, in my opinion, goes much deeper and can be found within Marx's own writings. I shall try to show that unless some theoretical obstacles contained in these writings are removed, the efforts to create a Marxist evaluative ethics will not succeed.

II

In attempting to develop this thesis it is necessary to consider two questions: what has served as a basis for a completely nonethical interpretation of Marx and what are the reasons usually given by those who claim that Marx's writings have no ethical content, indeed that they *could not* have such content?

First of all it is a fact that Marx himself wrote that he had transcended the domain of philosophy and entered the field of a "real, positive science." Consequently he thought that he was the founder of scientific socialism in contrast to a utopian one. Secondly there are several of Marx's would-be antiethical and antimoral statements. For instance:

a. Communism is for us not a state which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.¹

b. The communists in general preach no *morality*, which Stirner does extensively. They do not make moral demands upon men—to love another, not to be egoists, etc. On the contrary, they know very well that egoism as well as self-sacrifice is, in certain circumstances, a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals.²

c. Law, morality and religion have become to him [the proletariat] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which just as many bourgeois interests lurk in ambush.³

d. *Moral* is “*impotence in action*.” Every time it fights a vice it is defeated. And Rudolph does not even rise to the standpoint of an independent moral, based at least on the consciousness of *human dignity*. On the contrary, his moral is based on the consciousness of human weakness. He is a *theological moral*.⁴

The group of interpreters, both Marxists and non-Marxists, who usually cite the above quotations in support of their contention that Marx's writings are nonethical, include Werner Sombart, Benedetto Croce, Karl Kautsky, Max Adler, Rudolph Hilferding, some neo-Kantians, Lenin, Lucien Goldman and so on.

The consequence of this interpretation is that either there has been no work done among the supporters of a Marxist ethics, or an ethical complement to Marx has been unsuccessfully sought in Darwin (Kautsky), Darwin and Kant (Ludwig Woltmann), in Kant alone (some neo-Kantians) and so on.

III

The group who believes that Marx's writings lend themselves to an ethical interpretation includes among others Eduard Bernstein, Maximilian Rubel, Karl Popper, John Lewis and Eugene Kamenka. However within the group some members consider the doctrine of Marx to be purely ethical and nonscientific while others contend that it is

¹ MEGA, I, 5, 25; cf. *The German Ideology*, transl. by R. Pascal, New York 1960, p. 26.

² MEGA, I, 5, 227.

³ MEW, IV, 472; cf. K. Marx-F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow 1955, vol. I, p. 44.

⁴ MEGA, I, 3, 379; cf. K. Marx-F. Engels, *The Holy Family*, Moscow 1956, p. 265.

partly ethical and partly scientific. I myself would join the latter division. Again one should note that these members are both Marxists and non-Marxists. The following texts of Marx are some on which this group could base its assertion:

a. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, debasement, subjugation, humility, in short, all the properties of the *canaille*, and the proletariat, which does not want to be treated as *canaille*, needs its courage, its consciousness of self, its pride and its independence, far more than its bread.⁵

b. [In his Address to the First International Marx spoke of] the simple laws of morals and justice which ought to govern the relations of individuals.⁶

c. The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society, the standpoint of the new materialism is human society or socialized humanity.⁷

d. [Marx pleaded for] an association in which the free development of each will lead to the free development of all.⁸

Furthermore the writings of Marx are full of ethical language. For example, in his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx very often uses such words and phrases as the following: "crude self-interest and unfeeling 'cash-payment,'" "oppression," "degradation of personal dignity," "unashamed, direct and brutal exploitation," "ruthlessness," "modern enslavement by capital," "subjugation," "masses of workers are slaves" and so on. If anyone remarks that these are mainly Marx's political and not scientific writings, I could easily reply by quoting *Das Kapital*.⁹

Marx was from his early to his last writings, i.e. both in his, as he put it, philosophical and scientific phase, one of the greatest and most radical humanist thinkers in history. Moreover he was an heir of the great European humanistic-ethical tradition. Having taken seriously the ideals of the great Western democratic revolutions, he, on the basis of them, strongly and rightly criticized the capitalist society. Of course, he did not dwell on these ideals but tried to develop, deepen and further concretize them. All of this has been recognized and praised by many important non-Marxist thinkers. A Marxist could hardly pay a greater tribute to the humanistic and ethical ideals

⁵ MEW, IV, 200.

⁶ MEW, XVI, 13; cf. Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 385.

⁷ MEGA, I, 5, 535; cf. Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. II, p. 404.

⁸ MEW, IV, 482; cf. Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 54.

⁹ See, for instance, vol. I, chapters 4, 7, and 13.

of Marx than, for instance, Karl Popper did in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.¹⁰

Marx's most fundamental ideal was that of a free, socialized, creative, many-sided, integral, autonomous and dignified personality. The more specific content is given to it by his ideas of dealienation, the abolition of social, especially class, inequalities, withering away of the state and so on. In brief, Marx's opus is, in my opinion, rich in the humanistic-ethical content that could and should be used to develop a normative ethics.

IV

However despite all these possible textual references, some interpreters have asserted that the doctrine of Marx is ethically empty and necessarily so. Before attempting to comment on this assertion, we must address ourselves to another: namely, that Marx claimed to be only a scientist and made some (allegedly) antiethical statements, despite the ethical content of his writings. For this I can see only two possible explanations.

1. Either he did not notice the ethical content of his own thought, or

2. He meant by 'science' something rather different than the "value-free" science that his nonethical interpreters have had in mind. In line with this, his allegedly antiethical and antimoral statements were in fact directed only against moralism and a certain kind of ethical language usage.

The first alternative seems to me very improbable in regard to a man of Marx's calibre, particularly if we bear in mind the extent of the ethical contents of his writings. However in my mind there are several reasons for the second alternative. First, *all along* Marx used evaluative language including that of an ethical nature. If he had thought this to have been irreconcilable with the realm of "real, positive science," he would have tried to stop using it the moment he wanted to enter this realm. Secondly, Marx never made, explicitly or implicitly, such a distinction between evaluative and cognitive statements as has been assumed by his nonethical interpreters. Thirdly, we must never forget that he was Hegel's follower and that Hegel,

¹⁰ 4th ed., London 1962, vol. II, ch. 22.

rejecting Kant's dualism, claimed the unity of *Sein* and *Sollen*.

It seems to me that when entering the scientific stage, Marx changed his mind only as to the legitimacy of independent uses (from cognitive statements) of evaluative statements. In other words, he did not then try to avoid using them if and only if he thought they could be logically supported by cognitive statements. To add another point, he thought that in science cognitive statements play a primary role and evaluative statements only a subordinate one.

I believe that Marx's *implicit* meta-axiological and meta-ethical views were cognitivistic. Consequently he could continue to use evaluative and ethical language and at the same time believe that he was still only in the field of science. Many Marxists correctly write that the works of Marx contain considerable material for a normative ethics, but they wrongly assume that despite this he was merely a scientist. Together with Marx they make a cognitivist fallacy. However we should not overlook the fact that in Marx's time the cognitivist idea was by far the prevailing one in the theoretical self-consciousness of philosophers and scientists, for it was almost half a century before the first modern and systematic meta-axiological and meta-ethical studies began. Only in our century have philosophers rather clearly distinguished between evaluative and cognitive statements and found out the nature of their interrelations.

All the texts of Marx quoted in division II except one, can easily be interpreted in accordance with what I have said as being antimoralistic and not antimoral. The whole context of the exempted text—"Law, morality and religion have become for him [the proletariat] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which bourgeois interests lurk in ambush"—shows, however, that it is directed only against bourgeois morality and not morality as such. I also believe that the other texts of Marx which are or might be quoted by his nonethical interpreters could be explicated in support of my thesis. Moreover if any counter-examples exist, they would not destroy my claim but rather point out that on some occasions Marx hesitated.

There are two principal characteristics of the moralism that Marx opposed:

1. the use of moral language which is independent from cognitive language and which achieves primary importance in comparison with cognitive language to criticize the existing morality and simultaneously to preach the new "true" morality;

2. the belief that significant moral change and reform can be effected in this way.

The counterpart of moralism in practice is ethicism in theory. Utopian socialism was essentially moralistic and ethicist. As is well known Marx was in the beginning primarily a humanist-moralizing thinker. His ideological commitment was liberal and only after that socialist. Very quickly he wanted to become a scientific, in contrast to a utopian, socialist.

Marx's aversion toward moralism cannot be explained, or at least to any extent, by his personal moral characteristics, as for example Karl Popper attempted: "Marx avoided an explicit moral theory, because he hated preaching. He was deeply distrustful of moralists who usually preach one thing and do the other."¹¹ For Marx did have the respect for at least some utopian socialists' personal morality although he opposed their moralism, simply because he wanted to replace moralistic socialism by a scientific one. In contrast to the utopian, moralistic socialism Marx tried to follow two principles:

1. he used ethical language only if he thought it could be logically supported by cognitive language and to attach exclusively a secondary importance to the former;

2. instead of putting his hopes into moral preaching, he insisted on the need of changing social conditions resulting in immorality; to acquire the knowledge for these conditions he plunged into the scientific investigation of the existing social reality, its supporting forces, its tendencies and laws, possibilities for and carriers of its eventual change and so forth. That was the only way of breaking into the causes of the existing immoral order. Utopian socialism tried to deal primarily with the effects instead of the causes. That is why it was powerless, inefficient and naive.

Against this background it is not difficult to understand why cognitive language became of primary importance to Marx. In the forefront was his effort to show the necessity and lawfulness of replacing capitalism with socialism. The ethical criticism of capitalist reality was only of secondary importance for him. And the *explicit* ethical justification of socialism as his cause was the least important for him. These have misled some of his interpreters who have come to the wrong conclusion that there necessarily was no place for ethical ideas in Marx's theory.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 385.

Marx's only implicit meta-ethical cognitivism has been doubly misleading. Some interpreters, not having noticed it and having taken into account Marx's statement about the pure scientific nature of his doctrine, have been misled and have concluded that it did not have and could not have any ethical content. From such people, even if they are Marxists, it is, of course, unreasonable to expect any effort to develop a normative ethics based on Marx.

The others, however, have been misled to think that there is a basis in Marx for a *scientific normative ethics*. Much time and energy have been spent in trying to create a "scientific Marxist normative ethics." Since normative ethics, including a Marxist one, cannot be a science, all these efforts have been doomed to failure. But still it is possible, in my opinion, to work out a Marxist normative ethics *using*, among other things, all relevant scientific knowledge as cognitive premises or reasons for ethical statements.

V

The primary characteristic of Marx's thought is activism. Its core consists of these categories: practice, freedom and self-realization of man as man. The underlying principle of this activism is some sort of moderate historical determinism expressed in the following way: "Men make their own history. But they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."¹²

Marxists should start seriously considering, developing and justifying this middle of the ground position between extreme historical determinism and extreme indeterminism. While in post-Marxian Marxism this (possibly convenient) scheme has been mainly repeated, in some other philosophical orientations serious and detailed works on historical determinism and freedom have been written. Of course, one cannot say that they resolved the problem, but only came a little closer to it. The final solution is expected only by a naive person who does not know that this is one of the eternal philosophical problems.

Unfortunately Marx did not consistently hold a moderate historical deterministic view. Some of his texts reveal an internal conflict and

¹² *MEW*, VIII, 115; cf. Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. I, p. 247.

tension between moderate and extreme deterministic inclinations. One has to bear in mind that Marx belonged to the nineteenth century science in which rigid determinism of natural science still was a theoretical and methodological ideal.

VI

Marx correctly stressed the influence of the economic, especially of the class-economic, position of man upon his morality. One's moral views often really are ideological rationalizations of his economic-class interests. If today we try to penetrate formally identical abstract moral ideas of various people in order to identify different contents expressing and rationalizing different social interests, it is at least partially due to the impact of Marx. His idea of the ruling morality as the ruling class morality may also be fruitful. All these ideas are, in my opinion, important for ethics and particularly for the sociology of morals. It may be that they are commonplace now. If they are, it is to Marx's credit.

However, some of Marx's formulations of the moral "superstructure" being determined by the economic "foundation" are so much overdone that Engels found it necessary in his last letters to warn that they should not be understood literally.

Some Marxists seem to think that they can at the same time do both things—on the one hand, to hold such extreme formulations of economic determinism and, on the other hand, to insist upon the work on Marxist normative ethics, assuming that there is a possibility of its significant influence. It is, however, impossible to have one's cake and eat it too. If morals were *fully* dependent upon and determined by economic conditions, there would be no chance whatsoever for the formative and reformative function of moral and ethical statements. The *only* way of exerting influence upon people's moral life would consist in changing their economic position.

VII

Some of Marx's statements on the necessity of socialism are so rigid that they verge on fatalism, for example the following ones:

"But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature its own negation."¹³

Marx approvingly cites one of the reviewers of his *Das Kapital*:

Consequently, Marx only troubles himself about one thing; to show, by rigid scientific investigation, the necessity of successive determinate orders of social conditions, and to establish, as impartially as possible, the facts that serve him for fundamental starting points. For this it is quite enough, if he proves, at the same time, both necessity of the present order of things, and necessity of another order into which the first must inevitably pass over; and this all the same, whether men believe or do not believe it, whether they are conscious or unconscious of it. *Marx treats the social movement as a process of natural history, governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence. . . .*¹⁴

In the following passage Marx holds a moderate deterministic conception treating social "laws" as "tendencies," and at the same time holds an extreme deterministic view according to which social laws function with "iron necessity": "Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the *natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity.*"¹⁵

"And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the *natural laws of its movement*—and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. *But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.*"¹⁶

Engels' definition of freedom, taken over from Hegel, as "awareness of necessity" is consistent only with the extreme deterministic passages in Marx. It easily can be shown that this definition of freedom is untenable. Real freedom is possible only within Marx's moderate determinism. Let me state quite briefly what I argued at length

¹³ Cf. Wright C. Mills, *The Marxist*, New York 1962, p. 67 (*Manifesto*).

¹⁴ *MEW*, XXIII, 26; cf. *Capital*, Moscow 1955, vol. I, p. 18 (Afterword to the 2nd German edition). Italics are mine—S.S.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12; cf. *Capital*, p. 8 ff. (Preface to the first German edition). Italics are mine—S.S.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15; cf. *Capital*, p. 10. Italics are mine—S.S.

elsewhere. Moderate determinism believes that there is more than one historical possibility but that the number of historical possibilities is limited. Freedom, then, is the ability to choose between them and to realize the chosen possibility.

Let us suppose for a moment that the rigid deterministic theses of Marx are true. In other words, we shall assume that socialism is inevitable in the sense that people are able, as it were, only slightly to assist or render more difficult this necessity. What then would be the consequences for a corresponding normative ethics?

I shall take for granted that the function of such an ethics should be: a) morally to justify a socialism which is inevitable, and b) morally to oblige people to bring it about. The first part (a) of the job should and could be done even if Marx were right in saying that there was no possibility whatsoever, so to say, to add something to or to take away anything from the necessity of socialism. Even that which is absolutely necessary still could be good or bad. But the second part (b) of the job has sense only if human activity can make any difference to what happens. Morally to oblige someone to do something is rational only to the extent in which it is in one's power to do it. However according to the above quotations of Marx, people can do very little about the historical course. Therefore they can have very little moral responsibility for it.

It follows, I hope, that Marx's doctrine, by being (in some of its parts) strictly deterministic, frustrates ethically its own cause. There is not much sense for a rigid determinist to urge people to be morally concerned about making socialism emerge. However Marxist normative ethics, by its very Marxist nature, has to do this and in addition must be primarily a social ethics.

Just because he sometimes thought that socialism, no matter what people do, was inevitable, Marx did not feel the need of trying to give an explicit ethical justification of socialism. Even less did he want to present to the people the moral obligation of trying to realize it. This has misled some of his interpreters to think that his works are, and necessarily so, without any ethical content. Karl Popper,¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin,¹⁸ H. B. Mayo¹⁹ and some others also were misled to conclude

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, chapter 22.

¹⁸ *Karl Marx*, London 1948, p. 140.

¹⁹ *Democracy and Marxism*, New York 1955, p. 231.

that Marx identified historical necessity with the moral criterion.

Let us pause for a moment to deal with Popper's interpretation which is the most worked out of these three. The only text he quotes to support it is the following one of Engels:

Certainly, that morality which contains the greatest number of elements that are going to last is the one which, within the present time, represents the overthrow of the present time; it is the one which represents the future; it is the proletarian morality. . . .

First of all, it is not at all clear that Engels here regards historical necessity as the moral criterion. But even if he did, from that it would not follow that Marx did the same. More important, Popper did not quote Marx and I believe could not simply because there is, in my opinion, no text in Marx that explicitly or implicitly is of that nature. Tucker²⁰ rightly rejects Popper's interpretation, reminding us that Marx first arrived at the idea of a good society and only later became persuaded of its inevitability. Of course, this counterargument is not by itself conclusive. Popper could still insist that in his second phase Marx was an ethical historicist. I believe, however, that Popper cannot prove this either. I should like to add that *psychologically* the idea of an ethical justifiability of socialism led Marx to believe in its inevitability, and not vice versa. Marx was an extremely optimistic and progressivistic thinker. *Logically*, however, the moral criterion and historical necessity are for Marx independent from each other.

But let us return to the main line of this paper. Marxist normative ethics should invite and morally obligate people to use all their efforts in effecting socialism. However to be able to do this, it must renounce Marx's extreme deterministic formulations. Moreover instead of speaking about the inevitability of socialism, it is, in my opinion, more acceptable to consider socialism as a *real historical possibility tending strongly to realize itself*. Today not even the survival of humanity, let alone socialism, can be thought of as inevitable. Whether socialism will come about or not *completely* depends on people and their actions. Only such a Marxist doctrine may conceive of people as *fully* morally obligated to actualize socialism.

²⁰ R. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge, Mass., 1961, p. 21.