

Marx (Key Ethical Thinkers)

Marx was primarily a social theorist, not a moral philosopher, he wrote very little specifically about ethics, yet he has been responsible for some of the most influential ideas about ethics in the modern world. His criticisms of capitalism and of the human impact of capitalism are widely shared even by those who would reject many aspects of his thought; and the social and historical account of ethics which, I shall argue, is fundamental to his thought, raises issues of relativism that are central to the current discussion of ethics.

These claims are controversial. Indeed, almost everything about Marx's thought is controversial, particularly in the field of ethics. There is disagreement even about whether it involves ethical values at all; and, if it does, about what sort of values these are. Marx himself is to blame for much of this confusion. What he says about the place of ethics in his thought is puzzling and apparently contradictory. On the one hand, he maintains that his approach is that of a social scientist. The primary purpose of his work, he insists, is to understand and explain the nature of the social world (and particularly its present – capitalist – form) and the 'natural laws of its movement' (Marx, 1961, 10), rather than to judge it in moral terms or put forward ideal conceptions of how a future society ought to be. Indeed, he applies this approach even to ethical ideas and values themselves, treating them as social and historical products – as forms of 'ideology' – and analysing them accordingly. He explicitly denies that his account of capitalism and his conception of communism rely on an appeal to ethical principles (Marx, 1978a, 635-6; Lukes, 1985, chapter 2). On the other hand, it is evident that Marx's writings do not constitute a 'value free' or ethically neutral sort of social theory. They quite explicitly espouse a political outlook and involve a

practical commitment to the overcoming of capitalism and creation of an alternative form of society.¹

It is sometimes argued that Marx adopted an ethical perspective only in his youth, and particularly in his writings on alienation, when he was still strongly influenced by Hegel, but that he breaks with this decisively in his later work. That view was influentially advocated by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1969). However, the idea that there is a radical discontinuity of this kind in Marx's philosophy has been widely criticized and now has little support. Even Althusser himself came to question it in his final writings and acknowledged that moral ideas are present throughout Marx's work (Althusser, 2006). In short, Marxism involves both a social theory and an ethical outlook, and it seeks to combine these two aspects within a unified whole.²

These claims are frequently criticized for being confused and contradictory, particularly by the 'analytical Marxists'³ who have dominated recent discussion of Marxism in the English-speaking world. Marx's work does involve a critical

¹ See Lukes (1985, chapter 2) for documentation of these apparently conflicting views in Marx and other Marxists.

² For that reason Marxism used to be termed 'scientific socialism' by the Soviets. The phrase has now fallen into disuse.

³ That is, philosophers whose project has been to bring 'the techniques of analytical philosophy' to the interpretation of Marxism, for example, Cohen, Geras, Lukes, etc.. For criticisms see Sayers (1984; 1998, chapters 7-8).

perspective, they argue, but this cannot derive from a social account of ethics of the kind that Marx claims to hold. If ideas and values are the products of existing conditions, they can only reflect and endorse those conditions. Social criticism must involve appeal to values that transcend them. The social and historical account of values must be abandoned if Marx's social critique is to be upheld. In so far as Marx is critical of present society – as he clearly is – he must be appealing to transhistorical values, even though he himself explicitly denies this. Various accounts are then given of what these values are supposed to be. For the most part, these repeat the familiar positions of liberal moral philosophy. Either Marxism is interpreted as a form of ethical naturalism that relies on a concept of universal human nature, or it is said to appeal to universal standards of justice and right. Both of these approaches reject the social and historical approach that is fundamental to Marxism and attribute to it transhistorical ethical foundations in the manner of Enlightenment liberalism.

Marx's approach is quite different. It involves a historical and immanent form of critique. Marx's philosophy is not drawn from Enlightenment liberal sources, but nor does it drop from the skies, it has its origins in Hegel's philosophy, as Marx himself explicitly acknowledges. But this is beyond the deliberately restricted horizons of 'analytical' Marxism, which has had the programme of trying to reinterpret ('reconstruct') Marx without reference to Hegel. Such self-chosen ignorance is not a satisfactory basis upon which to interpret Marx's approach. For Marx follows Hegel (1991) in maintaining that ethical values are social and historical products. They should not be interpreted as abstract principles (Moralität) in the manner of Enlightenment philosophy, but rather as forms of 'ethical life' (Sittlichkeit), as norms embodied in social institutions and practices. And yet Hegel is

also committed to specific ethical values, though of course these are very different to those of Marxism.

The historical approach

According to Marxism, then, ethical values are social and historical products, they do not have a transhistorical source. It is wrong to think that if values are social phenomena they cannot be critical but must simply endorse the current social order. Actual societies are not monolithic unities, they contain conflicting forces within them. Some of these support the established order, others oppose it. Social reality is contradictory. Negative and critical tendencies exist within it, they do not need to be brought from outside in the form of transcendent values: they are rooted in forces which are present within existing conditions themselves. In this way, Marx's social theory, so far from undermining his critical perspective, provides the basis on which it is developed and justified.

Moreover, as Marx is well aware, this account must also apply to his own values. For Marxism, like any other outlook, is a product of particular social and historical circumstances. In so far as Marxism is a political outlook, Marx maintains that it expresses the aspirations and interests of the critical forces, the working class of modern industrial society. (Marx and Engels, 1978b, part 3).

A social account of this sort must answer the charge of relativism, for it appears to imply that Marxism is just one among a number of conflicting outlooks with no better claim to validity than any of the others. How does Marxism respond to this sort of objection?

According to Marx, the social world is not static. The conflicts it contains lead to change. The present order is not fixed and final. Ultimately it will be superseded by a new and different form of society. Moreover, historical change is not a mere succession of different social systems. It takes the form of a development through stages and involves progress. These Hegelian notions are crucial to the Marxist theory of history and essential to its response to ethical relativism. Historical development is made up of a succession of distinct stages or 'modes of production'. In the West, ancient slave societies were followed by feudalism, and then by capitalism. And this is not the end of the story. The conflicts that are an ineliminable feature of the capitalist system will eventually give rise to further historical stages, Marx maintains, capitalism will eventually be succeeded by communism, which itself will go through a process of development.

These different historical stages do not simply replace each other in an arbitrary succession. Each new stage arises on the basis of the previous stage. It provides a resolution of the conflicts of the previous stage and constitutes a progressive change; but the new stage then gives rise to new conflicts and the development continues. Each stage is a necessary part of the overall process, justified for its time and relative to the conditions which it supersedes.⁴ But each constitutes only a particular and ultimately transitory stage, destined eventually to perish and to be replaced by a higher and more developed one. In the process of development, the

⁴ 'Supersession' is the usual translation of the Hegelian term 'aufhebung'.

Hegel (1969, 107) uses it to describe a dialectical process of development in which an earlier stage is both negated by a later one and at same time preserved in it.

conditions for the emergence of the next stage gradually take shape within the ‘womb’ of the present. To the extent to which this occurs, present conditions cease to be progressive and become, instead, a fetter and a hindrance to the process of development.

This historical theory provides the basis on which Marx criticizes capitalism and advocates a communist alternative. He regards both in historical terms. He does not attempt to criticize the present system on the basis of universal principles, or to spell out a transhistorical ethical ideal of how a future society ought to be. His critique does not appeal to transcendent standards; it is immanent and relative. Relative to the feudal conditions that it replaces, capitalism constitutes a progressive development. From the perspective of capitalist society and the values associated with it, feudal society – with its fixed hierarchy of ranks and privileges, its restrictions on commerce and trade and on personal beliefs and practices – appears oppressive and unjust. However, as the conditions for a higher, communist form of society take shape within it, capitalism in turn becomes a fetter to further development. From the standpoint of this emerging form of society, capitalist social relations in their turn increasingly act as hindrances to human development, and the inequalities they generate appear to be unjust. This standpoint – which comes into being only with the development of capitalist society, and is immanent in it and relative to it – provides the basis for Marx’s ethical perspective.

Marx’s conception of communism is similarly historical and relative. It does not attempt to envisage an ideal future society on the basis of transcendent ethical notions, either of human flourishing or of justice. For it does not regard communism as the realization of a transhistorical moral ideal, but rather as a concrete historical

stage which will eventually supersede capitalism, and which will be the outcome of forces which are at work within present capitalist society.⁵ ‘Communism is for us not a state of affairs 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’ (Marx and Engels, 1978a, 162).⁶

The concept of progress

The historical account of ethics that I have just sketched relies crucially on the concept of progress. It is often argued that this concept cannot provide a valid basis for ethics. The use of the concept in this way, it is said, violates the fact/value distinction. If the term ‘progress’ is being used purely factually to mean ‘whatever comes next’, then it provides no basis for the value that is put on progress. Alternatively, the concept of progress tacitly embodies values, and these values must be justified, but this cannot be done simply on the basis of a factual account of history. Marx is thus accused of confusing facts and values and committing a version of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (Geras, 1992).

Marxism is, indeed, a form of naturalism. This is a well established approach in ethics. As naturalistic moral philosophers from Aristotle on have argued, some facts have evaluative implications – namely, facts about the necessary conditions for

⁵ The theory of history as a progressive process – on which these ideas depend – has been much discussed and criticised, but that is not my topic here.

⁶ See Sayers (1998, chapters 7-8) for a fuller presentation of these arguments.

human flourishing. More specifically, Marxism is a form of historicism which rejects the dualistic distinction of facts and values which this criticism presupposes.

Marxism is primarily a historical theory, but that is not to say that it is a purely descriptive and explanatory theory on the model of physics or chemistry. It also involves a political commitment to communism, practical ends are integral to it. This is not necessarily fallacious. It is quite possible to combine both a descriptive and an evaluative aspect validly within a single outlook. Medicine provides a familiar example. Medical practice attempts to base itself on a scientific understanding of facts about the working of the body, and yet it is also committed to a practical end: the promotion of health and well-being. This end is not an optional or arbitrary one in medicine; it is not a mere preference on the part of the doctor. Not only is it integral to the practice of medicine (it is enshrined in the Hippocratic Oath ('The Hippocratic Oath,' 2003)), the end of health is given for medicine objectively, by the human body itself, as its end.

Similarly, if Marx is correct in his analysis of capitalism, communism is not merely a subjective preference of communists; it is the objective tendency of history itself; and in adopting it as an end Marxists are aligning themselves with the movement of history. This involves both a historical judgement and a choice of values. The concept of progress in Marx has both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning. Capitalism is not only the stage after feudalism, it is also a 'higher' and 'more developed' stage than feudalism.

Happiness and the human good

‘Higher’ in what sense? So far I have focused on the historical and immanent form of Marx’s ethical outlook. But to answer this question we must consider its content, we must look at the specific values to which Marx appeals when he criticizes capitalism and advocates communism.

Two opposed approaches have dominated accounts of these values. On the one hand, some locate them in the naturalistic, utilitarian and economic tradition. They maintain that Marx criticises capitalism on the basis of a notion of universal human nature and that he argues that communism will better promote human flourishing and the human good.⁷ Others insist that Marx criticises capitalism for its exploitation and inequality by appealing to universal standards of justice and right.⁸ The same two approaches dominate liberal enlightenment moral thought. They are often treated as exclusive alternatives, but they need not be. As we shall see, Marx’s philosophy involves elements of both, and in this again there are similarities with Hegel.

Marx clearly has a conception of human happiness and the human good. He criticizes capitalism for the way it systematically impoverishes the lives of working people, even while it leads to a massive increase in social productive power. In general, material and economic values quite clearly play a fundamental role in Marx’s thought. ‘Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The newfangled sources of wealth, by

⁷ Lukes (1985), Wood (1980).

⁸ Geras (1985; 1992; 1995), Cohen (1988), Elster (1985).

some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want' (Marx, 1978c). He sees in communism a form of society which will enable people of all classes to develop and flourish more fully.

Development of the productive forces is, for Marx, the main index of historical development. He does not romanticize the simple life. In this respect, he agrees with the outlook of classical political economists and utilitarian thinkers such as Adam Smith, Hume and Bentham. However, Marx's conception of human flourishing is much wider than the narrow economic and utilitarian hedonism of these thinkers. He does not see economic development solely as a means to satisfy the material needs of homo economicus. He has a much broader and fuller notion of human nature.

This is developed most explicitly in connection with the concept of alienation and its overcoming in his early writings. Humans are not only creatures of material needs, mere individual consumers, but active, productive and social beings. Sometimes it is suggested that these ideas are derived from Aristotle (Meikle, 1985; Pike, 1999), but there is little evidence for that view. Marx seldom refers to Aristotle. Moreover, Aristotle regards material labour as a lowly and despicable activity, whereas for Marx it is, potentially at least, a primary form of satisfaction and fulfilment. Hegel is the most important source for these ideas, as Marx himself acknowledges. Hegel's 'outstanding achievement', he says, is that he 'conceives the self-creation of man as a process ... he therefore grasps the nature of labour and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the result of his own labour' (Marx, 1975b, 386).

These ideas are embodied in Marx's claim that the human being is a 'species being' (Gattungswesen). The immediate roots of this notion are in Feuerbach's philosophy, where the term condenses a variety of ideas about human nature in a rather cloudy way. The ideas of conscious, free, universal (i.e., rational), social and productive being are all contained in it (Feuerbach, 1957, 1-4). The notion is a direct descendant of the Hegelian idea of 'spirit' (Geist) which also combines these elements. Our species being is our distinctively human being. According to Marx, this consists in the fact that we are conscious, active, universal, productive and social beings. Conscious social productive activity is our 'species activity' which distinguishes us from other animals.

The practical creation of an objective world, fashioning of organic nature is proof that man is a conscious species-being ... It is true that other animals also produce ... But they produce ... one-sidedly, while man produces universally, they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need. (Marx, 1975b, 328-9).

Although Marx used the term 'species being' for only a brief period in 1844, the ideas it embodies remain fundamental to his thought. It implies an account of human nature and of the role of work in human life very different to the utilitarian views of the classical economists. Productive activity need not necessarily be unpleasant toil, a mere means to the end of satisfying our material consumer needs. Human beings get satisfaction from actively shaping and forming the world and seeing their powers objectified and confirmed in the product. We gain satisfaction from exercising our powers and being productive (Sayers, 2011, chapter 2).

This thought, inherited from Hegel and Feuerbach, is taken up and developed by Marx as the basis for a moral critique of capitalist society. Our productive activity, instead of being a source of fulfilment, has been made into hated toil. Similarly, modern technology constitutes enormous developments of human social productive and creative capabilities. We should be able to recognize and affirm it as the expression of our power and find realization in and through it. But for the most part we do not do so. Rather it often seems to be an independent and hostile force, out of our control and working against us. To describe this situation, Marx uses the graphic image of a Genie that we ourselves have summoned up but which, ‘by some strange weird spell’ (Marx, 1978c), has now become an alien and malignant power. This need not, should not and, in future society, will not be the way in which we relate to our own products and powers, Marx argues. This is the critical force of the concept of alienation, and a fundamental part of Marx’s critique of capitalist society.

Human nature as historical

Through work we not only change the world, in the process we change ourselves too. ‘By ... acting on the external world and changing it [man] at the same time changes his own nature’ (Marx, 1961, 177). The development of the productive forces goes together with the development of human nature, of needs and capacities. Human nature is historical, needs are historical, they develop both quantitatively and qualitatively: ‘our desires and pleasures spring from society ... Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature’ (Marx, 1958, 94).

This is not to deny that there are universal human needs. To say that a need such as hunger, for example, is historical is not to deny that all human beings – indeed

all living organisms – require material sustenance, or that there is a core of basic needs the satisfaction of which is required simply for biological survival. However, the specific form that hunger takes – what food will satisfy it, even what constitutes food – goes beyond this and varies socially and historically. The need for food now, in this society, differs from what is needed in other societies and at other times.

Of course, Marx criticizes capitalism in so far as it fails to meet even minimum biological needs and results in malnutrition, hunger and even starvation. But his critique goes beyond this. He condemns capitalism, not just because it fails to satisfy basic and universal needs, but also because it fails to meet the more developed needs that it itself has created. His standard of assessment here is historical and relative and not absolute.

Why should the satisfaction of such historically created needs be valued? Only our basic and universal needs, it is sometimes argued, are ‘true’ needs. Modern society creates a host of ‘unnecessary’ desires and ‘false’ needs: desires whose satisfaction is not necessary for life and does not lead to genuine happiness. Marx, I am suggesting, does not share these views. Some, at least, of these new desires are ‘true’ needs relative to the social conditions in which they arise, in that their satisfaction is necessary for a minimum standard of social life and for happiness. This is not to reject the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ needs altogether, but it is to insist that this distinction is a historical and relative one, and it is thus to abandon the attempt to use a universal core of ‘true’ needs as a standard by which all development beyond it is to be judged.

Similar points apply to the need for productive and creative activity. Although this, too, is a universal human need, the specific form that it takes has varied. For most of history, people have sought fulfilment mainly outside of economic work

(work to satisfy material needs). The very idea that economic work can or should be a source of satisfaction is a relatively recent development in the main, as is the recognition that self-expression and self-realization are human needs.⁹ These characteristically socialist values are not transhistorical, they have come onto the agenda only in the modern period, with the emergence of the real historical prospect of overcoming alienation.¹⁰

Marx's account of needs and human nature thus involves much more than the narrow utilitarian and economic conceptions of them, and so too his notions of wealth and, ultimately, of the human good. The familiar economic idea of wealth reduces it to the acquisition of property and to material consumption. Marx insists that it must be replaced by a much fuller notion based on the idea of the human being 'rich in needs' – the human being who has developed the needs and capacities inherent in his or her 'species being' in an all-round way, unrestricted by the effects of private property and the division of labour. 'The rich man and the wealth of human need take the place of the wealth and poverty of political economy. The rich man is

⁹ It should be noted that there is also an earlier Christian tradition that values the dignity of labour.

¹⁰ Conversely, the utilitarian and economic view that we are mere consumers is itself a symptom and an expression of alienation. It portrays what is a specific historical condition as though it were the inevitable result of a supposedly universal human nature. Marx criticizes capitalism for reducing the pursuit of the human good to this narrow and limited form (Marx 1975c).

simultaneously the man in need of a totality of vital human expression; he is the man in whom his own realisation exists as inner necessity, as need' (Marx, 1975b, 356).¹¹ Human happiness is not restricted to the narrow satisfaction of our material desires. The true human good lies rather in the all-round development of our powers and capacities.

Justice and right

So far I have been focusing on Marx's ideas of human nature and the human good. Let us now turn to the role played in his philosophy by notions of justice and right. This gives rise to puzzles and problems similar to those raised by the role of naturalistic values. On the one hand, Marx denies that his account of capitalism or his conception of communism involve any reference to principles of 'eternal' justice. He associates such thinking particularly with utopian socialists like Proudhon and goes out of his way to repudiate it (Marx, 1978b, 531). As I have stressed, he maintains that his aim is to understand capitalism and its 'laws of motion' rather than to criticize it; and he insists that principles of justice and right themselves must be comprehended as social and historical products.

On the other hand, at times he undoubtedly condemns capitalism for its injustice and envisages communism as a fairer and more equal form of society. For example, he says that the capitalist system is founded upon 'the theft of alien labour time' (Marx, 1973, 705), and he attacks it for involving 'robbery', 'plunder', 'booty' and so on (Husami, 1978; Geras, 1985). These ways of talking cannot simply be

¹¹ Marx is using the term 'man' in a generic sense, to include women.

discounted as rhetorical flourishes, they occur repeatedly. Furthermore, many Marxists share the view that capitalism is unjust – this is an important aspect of the Marxist outlook, even though Marxist theory has had problems in accommodating it into the social scientific stance that it claims for itself. In short, despite Marx's denials it seems clear that criticism of capitalism as unjust, and a picture of a fairer society, do play a role in his thought.

Marx on justice

What standards does Marx appeal to in making these judgements? Many recent philosophers in the analytic tradition assert that Marx must be relying on transhistorical standards of justice, whatever he himself may claim to the contrary. As I have argued above, this assumption is unwarranted. Marx's approach is historical, his critical values are immanent and relative. He condemns capitalism and advocates communism on the basis of values that are rooted in forces that are immanent in the present.

What are these values? Various answers to this question have been proposed in the recent literature. According to Geras, Marx maintains that it is a universal principle of justice that those who labour are entitled to the product of their labour, on the grounds that 'it violates a principle of moral equality if the efforts of some people go unrewarded whilst others enjoy benefits without having to expend any effort' (Geras, 1992, 60).

This is indeed a standard of justice that Marx uses to condemn capitalism, in which there is a class who can live off the work of others without themselves working, simply by owning capital. However, this is not a transhistorical standard of

right, as Geras asserts. On the contrary, it is the standard that will apply in the initial stage of communism as Marx envisages it, when reward will be proportional to work done and no one will be able gain an income simply through ownership.

According to Marx, it will not be possible to create a fully communist society immediately after capitalism is overthrown, a transitional stage will be needed. In this, the capitalist state will be replaced by a communist one, which will take all private property in the means of production (i.e., capital) into common (state) ownership and use it for the common good rather than for private profit. After the state has withheld what is needed for reinvestment, for education and welfare provision, and so on, the remaining social product will be distributed in the form of wages according to the amount of work performed. The more you work, the more you will receive. This is a principle of equal exchange similar to that governing economic exchange in capitalist society (Marx calls it the principle of ‘bourgeois right’) – except in one important respect: in communism it will no longer be possible to gain an income simply by owning property (Marx, 1978b, 530).

Geras is right that Marx criticizes capitalism for violating this principle and allowing there to be a class whose ownership of capital allows them to gain a livelihood by exploiting the labour of others. In doing so, however, he is not appealing to a transhistorical or universal standard as Geras believes. Rather, he is adopting the ethical standpoint of a future communist society – a standpoint that is immanent in the present. This does not give rise to transhistorical values. For this future form of society and the norms it creates is in its turn destined eventually to be superseded by the further stage of full communism. In this the idea that entitlement should be based on work done will be transcended altogether. It will be a society of abundance in which wages and the

market will be completely eliminated. ‘The narrow horizon of bourgeois right [will] be crossed in its entirety’, as Marx puts it, ‘and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!’ (Marx, 1978b, 531)

Equality

Like Geras, Cohen also maintains that Marxism must necessarily invoke transhistorical principles of justice in order to criticize present society, but he gives a different account of what these are supposed to be. To explain them, Cohen gives the example of a camping trip by a group of friends in which equipment is shared and activities organized cooperatively and by mutual agreement. Claims to private ownership are suspended for the duration of the trip, and things are shared freely and help is given when it is needed, without any accounting of costs or expectation of payment.

Cohen argues that a camping trip of this sort – and full communism – are governed by a principle of distributive justice, a principle of what he calls ‘radical equality of opportunity’. According to this, ‘differences of outcome reflect nothing but differences of taste and choice, not differences in natural and social capacities and powers’ (Cohen, 2009, 18). This is questionable. Equality in various forms is the distributive principle that governs bourgeois society. With the abolition of private property and distribution according to need in full communism, the idea of an equal distribution is transcended. As Wood says, the principle of distribution according to need ‘does not treat people alike or equally ... but considers them simply as individuals with their own special needs and faculties.’ (Wood, 1979, 292) Different people will have different needs and these will be satisfied in different ways. The National Health

Service in Britain aspires to distribute health care in this way. Some individuals are seriously ill and need much in the way of resources, others are healthier and require less; each gets what they require to satisfy their needs. Equality is involved only insofar as each person's needs are fully and equally met, but there is no longer any concern to achieve a quantitatively equal distribution. In that sense, communism of this sort is 'beyond equality' (Sayers, 2011, 118-30).

Is full communism also 'beyond justice'? It is sometimes said that Marx thinks so, and his philosophy is compared to Hume's in this respect. Hume argues that principles of justice serve to maintain social order in conditions of moderate scarcity. They are not needed when there is abundance and people can take as much as they want without preventing others from doing likewise. Rules of property and distribution have no useful purpose in these conditions (Hume, 1894).

However, Marx's way of thinking about justice is quite different from this sort of consequentialism and utilitarianism. It should rather be located in the Hegelian tradition. Principles of justice and right are embodied in the norms governing social relations. All societies have such norms, all societies therefore have principles of justice. Communism means the abolition of private property and the individualist norms associated with it. It involves a communal form of property and communal notions of justice and right, not the elimination of property right altogether (Sayers, 2011, chapter 7).

Problems of relativism

For Marx, then, principles of justice are social and historical phenomena. They are the expressions of the norms governing social roles, institutions and practices. Like

Hegel, he sees principles of right as arising out of particular forms of ‘ethical life’ or Sittlichkeit (literally, customariness). Different social relations and practices involve different principles of justice. These principles arise in specific conditions, and are necessary and right for their time; but with time, as the conditions for a new social order develop, they lose their necessity and rightness. There is no single, universally right social order, no transhistorical and universally valid principles of justice. It is in these terms that Marx’s critique of the injustices of capitalism must be understood.

As we have seen already, a social and historical account of values of this kind raises issues of relativism. Why should the communist conception of justice be valued in present conditions, even if it is immanent in them? The mere fact that the course of history is moving in this direction (assuming that it is) does not seem to be a sufficient justification: what will be is not necessarily what ought to be, historical might does not necessarily make right (Nietzsche, 1983, 105). Marx maintains that the communist notion of justice expresses the interests and perspective of working people – but why should those in others classes support it? It seems that an historical theory cannot justify communist values.

Many philosophers see these as reasons to reject the historical account of values and insist that a critical perspective must rely on universal and transhistorical notions of justice. But these too face great problems of justification. The authors of the US ‘Declaration of Independence’ held their notions of justice and right to be ‘self-evident’. That is not tenable. What appears self-evident in one period and to one group may not seem so to others. To the authors of the ‘Declaration’ it seemed self-evident that ‘all men are created equal’; to Plato, Aristotle and many others in the ancient world,

and indeed even to many of their contemporaries, it appeared just as self-evident that men (and women) are created unequal.

Others, like Rawls, follow Kant in arguing that the principles of justice are matters about which there can be a rational consensus. Marx gives good reason to question this. 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' say the well known opening words of The Communist Manifesto. Conflicting classes have different and conflicting conceptions of justice. In these circumstances rational consensus cannot be achieved. It seems clear that universal rational agreement about moral matters does not exist in present capitalist society (MacIntyre, 1985), it is an imaginary ideological construct of liberal philosophers like Rawls. It cannot be achieved, Marx maintains, because the economic system of private ownership on which this society is based, and which is justified by its principles of justice, inevitably generates fundamental conflicts. This is the Marxist critique of liberal philosophies of justice and rights.

In present society there is not and cannot be a universally agreed rational perspective on moral matters, and Marxism does not claim to provide such a perspective. It too is a product of these social and historical conditions. It is not the universal perspective of all rational beings, but rather the outlook of a particular class of modern industrial society. Why then should it have any wider appeal or rational authority? We are back with the issue of relativism.

Marxism does not attempt to answer this question by appealing to universal human nature or universal reason as do philosophers in the liberal tradition. Nor does it rely, in Nietzschean fashion, on a purely arbitrary commitment to the will and perspective of a particular class or kind of individual. However, insofar as the

working class and its struggle for communism points towards the future course of history, Marx claims that it represents something more than the arbitrary will of a particular group.

How so? Various ways of answering this question have been suggested by philosophers in the Marxist tradition. The working class in Marx's sense are those who do not own the means of production and who must therefore sell their labour to earn a living. They are the great majority in modern capitalist society. By establishing a state that rules in their interests, communism claims to be more democratic than capitalist society ruled by a bourgeois liberal state. In the words of the Manifesto, it will 'win the battle of democracy' (Marx and Engels, 1978b, 490). Its governing principles will thus, it is claimed, enjoy democratic legitimacy.

Another way of dealing with the problem of relativism is suggested by Sandra Harding, writing from a feminist position. She agrees with Marx that ethical values are social and hence inescapably embody a particular perspective. She argues, however, that not all perspectives are epistemologically equal, 'some ... social locations are better than others' (Harding, 1993, 56). The marginalized and oppressed have less stake in defending the established order than other more privileged groups. In the words of the Communist Manifesto, working people have 'nothing to lose but their chains'. Their outlook, it may be argued, is less deformed by their particular situation, they have less reason therefore to have a distorted outlook.

However, Marx claims not just that the working class constitutes the majority, nor that its outlook is less likely to be distorted than that of other groups – he claims that the working class can claim for the first time to have a truly universal perspective. For the emancipation of the working class contains within it 'universal human

emancipation' (Marx, 1975, 333) and, more enigmatically, that communism will be the 'solution of the riddle of history' (Marx, 1975, 348).

What he means by these phrases is explained by the Hegelian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács. Previous revolutionary classes have claimed that they represented the universal social interest, but each soon found itself faced with opposing classes, and it transpired that it was in fact only a particular class struggling against others (Marx and Engels, 1978a, 173-4). The modern working class, however, has the possibility of creating a classless society that is no longer characterized by fundamental class divisions and antagonisms. Its struggle is thus, according to Lukács, not simply for its own particular class interests, for these can be achieved only through the overcoming of all class divisions, and the abolition of itself as a particular class. Its aim is its own overcoming (aufhebung). 'The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle' (Lukács, 1971, 80). This society is one in which for the first time the notion of human universality will have a genuine basis. In that sense, the modern working class is what Lukács regards as the universal class, and an ethic based on its perspective can be genuinely universal in character.

The Right and the Good

I have been arguing that two sorts of moral values can be found in Marx's work: there are naturalistic values based on ideas of the human good (happiness, flourishing), and there are also values of justice or right. These two kind of values are often treated as though they are incompatible and exclusive of each other.

Indeed, when such values are made into universal and abstract principles they contradict each other and lead to familiar ethical dilemmas. Thus the utilitarian and consequentialist approach when pushed to the extreme implies that actions should be judged solely according to their consequences and regardless of considerations of justice and right. Even great evil can then be justified if its consequence is to prevent greater evil: 'the ends justify the means'. This can lead to actions that seem quite evidently immoral; and this is often used as an argument against consequentialism and in favour of a morality of justice.

Conversely, principles of justice taken in abstraction imply that the demands of justice should be followed without regard to the consequences and even when these are disastrous: 'fiat justitia, periat mundus' (let justice be done, though the world perish). This seems immoral to the point of madness; and this in turn is used as an argument against an ethic of justice and in favour of consequentialism. These arguments seem to be going around in circles.

As far as I am aware Marx himself did not express a view on these issues. However, Hegel does, and his philosophy suggests a line that Marxism might well adopt. Hegel argues that standards both of goodness and justice have a valid place in moral thought, but only within limits, as long as they are not taken to extremes. For the most part, there need be no conflict between them, and no need therefore to opt for one to the exclusion of the other. Both are to be found in Marx, as I have argued, and both have a role in his critique of capitalism and in his vision of a better society for the future.

However, these principles may and sometimes do conflict in real life. The issues that then arise have been well described and explored in the literature of Marxism.

Particularly in the immediate postwar period there was an extensive discussion of whether or not those on the left should give their support to the Soviet regime during the cold war, when they were well aware of the terrible injustices that were being done by it, because it constituted the only effective opposition to the evil of US imperialism (Koestler, 1946, de Beauvoir, 1957, Sartre, 1961, Lukes, 1985, chapter 6).

As this literature graphically shows, there is no straightforward way of resolving the dilemmas that result when fundamental moral principles of the good and justice are in conflict. It would be wrong to argue for either in an a priori philosophical way, and insist that reliance should be placed solely either on naturalistic values or on principles of justice. Much of the recent disagreement among the analytical Marxists who I have been criticizing has been fuelled by insisting on just these positions. Such conflicts of principles reflect, rather, the fact that different aspects of actual social life are in fundamental conflict. The issue is practical not philosophical, it cannot be resolved purely theoretically.

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