potential in all of us, by way of creation or recreation, will simply be designated as 'good'.

We are not concerned at this point in discussing whether this projected state of affairs shall ever come to pass. We are only showing how certain of our concepts would alter their significance in such changed circumstances. Our value-word 'good' could only have the full rich singleness of meaning ascribed to it above when, as Marx puts it:

> the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and with it the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; when labour is no longer merely a means of life but has become life's principal need; when the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow abundantly. . . .[17]

Chapter II

Normative Judgements or the Meaning of 'Right'

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the meaning of the concept 'good' as it appears in value judgements about things can be derived from an analysis of the specific goods men produce. This meaning, bound up as it is with certain relations of production, can only be understood in the context of definite forms of social existence and it changes with alterations in the basic structure of society.

It will be argued in the present chapter that the meaning of the concept 'right' as it appears in normative judgements about human actions can be derived in a similar way—by deduction from specific rights which are grounded in the material conditions of life in this or that type of society. As a completely abstract term which applied everywhere at all times 'right', like other ethical expressions, would prove in fact to apply nowhere and at no time. It could only maintain the absolute purity of so universal a nature by never suffering the violation of getting involved in any concrete situation. Morality, on this interpretation of its terms, instead of being practical would tend to become a matter of ideal contemplation. And yet if concepts were not to some extent abstractions, thought could make no use of them; therefore in the course of investigating what 'right' means we shall also try to discover how such a concept could have arisen as a relatively detached ethical idea.

Rights represent claims and they can take the form of

claims on other people or claims to things. Whenever we say that it is 'right' to do this or that, we are recognizing the legitimacy of some claim. 'It is right to help a friend in need' implies a respect for a claim he has on us by virtue of that relationship. 'It is right to return a lost article to its owner' implies a respect for his claim to possession. This respect for claims, this recognition of their legitimacy is our acknowledgement of the element of universality in the concept of 'right' by which every admitted claim involves certain things it is right for people to do, not excluding ourselves. Expressions like 'might is right' or 'possession is all that counts' describe a situation in which the idea of *respect* for claims is missing. Mere descriptions of what people do cannot be universalized into what they *ought* to do; and in themselves they invest the concept of 'right' with no ethical significance.

Rights as claims on other people

Recognized claims on others are based on certain social relationships linking people together. There are considerations which children owe to parents and parents to children which must be taken into account in the actions they respectively perform; the bond of friendship carries with it the idea of mutual claims whose recognition is part of the meaning of that relation; and membership in a community involves a whole complex of reciprocal duties and rights.

If these relationships were eternal and unchanging, the concept of 'right' as deduced from them would have the completely universal quality sometimes ascribed to it. In fact, looked at historically, such relationships are seen to vary considerably at different times and places. Recognized claims of parents can hardly be the same in patriarchal as in matriarchal communities; the bonds of friendship which in a feudal context can involve loyalty unto death may only imply

a special concern for promise-keeping in a contractual society; and the whole range of social relationships may be quite rapidly transformed by the changes in circumstances which accompany, say, an industrial revolution. Since generally conceded claims depend on social relationships and since these relationships are determined by the material conditions of life in various societies, 'rights' as what people are entitled to expect from each other are ultimately grounded in the economic basis which supports this or that form of social organization.

It might be thought that family relationships which are bound up with the reproduction of human beings would be distinguishable from those relationships which are involved in the production of goods for human needs. Actually, variations in the forms of inheritance and the status of women show that family life is only a special instance of the general tone of social intercourse which echoes a particular mode of production.

From our assumption that the social existence of men determines their consciousness, we can deduce the fact that religious and philosophical ideas also reflect the basic economic structure of society; and often social relationships and the rights implicit in them are accounted for in terms of these ideas. This ideological supervention can obscure the connection between such relationships and the material conditions of life which gave rise to them. In our historical studies we may see the influence of economic considerations on the conduct of some social group when its members themselves were unaware of it at the time. To the question 'why is it right to bear arms in the service of a lord?' a vassal in the Middle Ages might have answered: 'Because God commands me to honor and obey my liege.' We realize now, of course, that such service was inherent in a social organization based on a particular system of land tenure.

Indeed, many social relationships reveal their economic origin by finding their practical expression in the way property is disposed. Rules of conduct in different societies are much concerned with such questions as what recompense in goods a man can seek for some injury done to him, or what rights a man has in his father's possessions or how a man must set about acquiring a wife where women themselves are regarded as property. An analysis of property relationships can therefore help us to appreciate the derivation and meaning of the concept of 'right'.

Rights as claims to things

We have seen how the concept of 'value' arises in connection with the production of goods for human use. The concept of 'right', insofar as it represents a respect for other people's proprietary interests, arises in connection with the distribution of those goods. All value is a result of the expenditure of human effort. That effort, at the same time that it creates valuable things, also establishes rights in them. As Locke has put it: "Whatever a man removes from the state of nature and mixes his labour with, thus joining to it something that is his own, thereby becomes his property."[1]

This simple formula seems obvious enough in the case of an individual working on his own to satisfy his personal needs; and it could be extended to cover a self-sufficient peasant family or tribal group which provides for the immediate wants of its members on a communal basis by directly-associated labor. But in such cases there is no problem about the ownership of property and therefore the question of rights in the abstract could hardly arise. It is only at a socially advanced stage of the division of labor that property rights become a distinguishable aspect of human relationships, since, as Marx explains:

> The various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of property; and the stage reached in the division of labour also determines the relations of individuals to one another with respect to the materials, instruments and products of labour.[2]

The attempt to find some development in the material conditions of life which could account for the precipitation of the idea of property rights as a relatively detached abstraction leads us to consider that stage of the division of labor when there are the beginnings of a market economy.

The law of value only makes its appearance as an external relationship when the separation between production and consumption has been confirmed in commodity exchange. Similarly, the concept of 'right' as a recognized claim to the possession of things only takes the form of an abstract principle when all property has begun to assume the character of commodities. As we have already noted, prior to the development of commodity production, rights in things can be defined in terms of obvious social relationships, like those obtaining between members of a family or tribe, or those between masters and slaves or lords and serfs. The customary rules regulating the disposition of property within social organizations of this type are quite simple and transparent as compared with the distribution of goods in the complex market economy which attains its fullest development under capitalism. Such pre-commodity rules cannot themselves give rise to an independent and abstract conception of 'right' because they are too closely tied to specific human relationships in societies still founded upon "the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellow men in a primitive tribal community or upon direct relations of subjection."[3] But once the domination of one group of men by another ceases to appear as naked subjection and becomes the law of private

property by which the position of the dominant group is established through ownership of the means of production, once the transaction between purchaser and seller of labor-power takes a purely economic form as a commodity deal, human relationships come increasingly to be defined in terms of rights in things. 'Right' itself loses its exclusive reference to claims between man and man and tends to become more and more 'objectified' as a stake in commodities. Just as relations between producers mutually engaged in creative work take the form of an equivalence between things, so other social relationships express themselves through rights of possession in things.

In the early stages of commodity exchange, when direct human relationships reflecting the material conditions of simpler types of society are in the process of being transformed into functions of a market economy, rules of conduct may still be borrowed from previous periods to regulate trading operations. Hybrid notions like the 'just price' or arbitrary injunctions against profiteering of any kind are characteristic of this phase of social development. But once commodity production has attained its fullest growth and exchange relationships have extended into every sphere of society, the economic system appears to be self-regulating and to require no correction or guidance from normative principles formulated in non-commodity terms. Instead of invoking ideas of human relations derived from membership in previous forms of social organization as a check on market deals, those very relations are conceived on the basis of men's encounters with each other in the market place as buyers or sellers of goods.

This freeing of the concept of 'right' from its immediate reference to interpersonal ties to reappear as proprietary relationships to things makes it sufficiently abstract to be codified in civil laws which have an impartial universality for whole

societies based on commodity production. Such legalized rights may come into conflict with rights which are still bound up with more direct relationships, as when mother and son go to court over a will or a man sues a friend for the non-payment of a debt.

Since sellers of labor-power and owners of the means of production are assumed to meet freely in the market place to strike a bargain whose terms are largely determined by an impersonal law of value, the agreement between them can be generalized abstractly as exemplifying the rights of man, the prerogative of every member of society to exchange his goods or his capacity for producing them on an equitable basis. The very translation of human bonds into terms of that commodity of commodities, money, so that no one need acknowledge any other master, can seem, by comparison with various forms of direct subjugation, to be a kind of individual liberation like a slave buying his own freedom—as long as no attempt is made to understand the real social relations concealed behind commodity dealings.[4] The idea that all men are equal is itself a correlate of the equalization of "human labor in general" as the source and measure of value; and, conversely, the notion of human equality had to acquire "the fixity of a popular prejudice" before the real nature of value could be properly appreciated.

To the extent that the legal expression of property rights and freedom of contract can be universalized for all commodity-producing societies, they come to be regarded as natural law, inevitable rules of human intercourse inherent in the nature of things and therefore beyond the reach of criticism. Just as the law of value appears to be a providential arrangement whereby economic order is maintained in spite of the anarchic actions of individual producers and traders, so legalized property rights seem to be the practical expression of a purely abstract justice. In the guise of eternal principles

which ought to be respected at all times and places they are invoked as the justification of social relations instead of being recognized simply as the consequence of such relations through the mediation of things.

But if the actions and attitudes of men in a commodity-exchanging society are to be regarded as an expression of abstract ethical principles, it is necessary to account for the fact that so many men come to the market with nothing to exchange but their labor-power while a few enjoy a commanding position through their control of the means by which that labor-power can be employed. The search for a moral starting point for the supposedly self-regulating system of a market economy leads to a mythical interpretation of primitive accumulation. It is assumed that in the past "there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and, above all, frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living."[5] Marx goes on to compare "the legend of theological original sin" by which "man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow" with "the history of economic original sin which reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential"! Such an economic fiction by which the primitive accumulation of capital is invested with virtue serves to conceal the naked forms of exploitation by ruthless suppression at home and violent conquest abroad which helped to lay the foundations for modern capitalism.

From this idea of virtuous thriftiness as the origin of working capital is derived the notion that the continuing abstemiousness of those who control the means of production accounts for any unconsumed product on which further expansion of the economy depends. Such an attempt to gloss over the fact of surplus value, which is simply the product of laborers during that portion of their working day left after creating the equivalent of their own standard of living, presupposes the doubtful thesis that those who dominate society through the ownership of property are remarkable for their frugality and the entirely unwarranted proposition that abstention itself is value-creative. As the law of value formulates the relationship between man as producer and man as consumer, the law of property which establishes rights in surplus value expresses the relationship between man as owner of the means of production and man as owner of nothing but his capacity to work.

Commodity production and ethical interpretations of 'right'

We have seen how an analysis of commodities yields two distinct meanings for a value-word like 'good'—a descriptive sense which refers to an object's usefulness and a prescriptive sense which honors the human labor incorporated in it. This analysis also reveals a discrepancy between the value of the total social product which human labor has created and the value of the goods actually distributed among those who made them which is only equivalent to their combined *labor-power*. The difference between these two aggregates has been designated surplus value. We have further seen how rights as claims to goods are derived from social relationships determined by the material conditions of life in a particular economic ordering of society. As these relationships are dehumanized by commodity exchange and transformed into relations between things, there is a tendency for claims on other people to take the form of legalized rights in things. The social fact of surplus value no longer appears as the exploitation of one section of society by another but is justified as the rational consequence of the natural laws of property.

This rationalization could only have arisen on the basis of a system of production in which human effort is not di-

rected immediately to the satisfaction of wants but to the creation of value in the form of marketable goods. The division of labor which is the prior condition for such a social development has a profound influence not only on the way men behave but even on the way they think about their behavior—the various ethical beliefs which they from time to time have held.

From the period when craftsmen first made articles not for their own use but to barter for other things, they had begun, in a sense, to divide themselves into two beings. Man as maker and man as enjoyer had become distinguishable within each person and there was a tendency for them to pull in opposite directions. The gap between purposeful effort and its due reward had the effect of driving apart reason which looked ahead to future satisfaction and feelings which made their demands in the present. This potential split in each man's integrity was inevitably deepened as the sundered functions of useful work and desirable gratifications became more and more identified with distinct classes—those who, on the whole, labored without enjoyment and those who enjoyed without working. The kind of schizophrenia which we have described as characterizing the individual in commodity-producing societies thus came in time to affect entire communities. The distinction between duty and pleasure which was to become such a marked feature of ethical thinking can therefore be seen as a reflection on the moral plane of both the split personality of the individual and the irreconcilability of class interests.[6]

The ideological consequences of this distinction can be traced in the extreme positions various philosophers have taken on the issue of whether duty or pleasure is the ultimate motivating force in human conduct. In Kantian morality the division between reason and duty on the one hand, and feelings and pleasure on the other, takes so final a form that they

inhabit entirely different worlds. The rightness of an act is considered to be vitiated by any motivation which does not stem directly from a purely rational regard for completely universalized maxims of behavior; and this regard must never be confused with personal emotions of any kind—not even the most altruistic feelings of benevolence.

At the opposite extreme are those thorough-going hedonists like Hobbes who argue that no actions are disinterested and that the pursuit of pleasure provides the sole impulse to all conduct. Reason is held to play a secondary role in merely suggesting how this overriding purpose may best be served. While utilitarians like Bentham and Mill subscribe to such a view of man's nature, they do not altogether deny themselves the language of duty when they attempt to move from this postulated fact of egoistic hedonism to the advocacy of acting for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This transition from descriptive statements to normative or evaluative judgements is, as we have seen, illegitimate; but the naturalistic fallacy is an illogical expression of the perfectly reasonable belief that there should be *some* connection between what it is in a person's interest to do and what it is right for him to do.

The dissociation of self-interest from respect for the claims of others in regard to human actions, like the distinction between utility and value in regard to goods, is ultimately rooted in the separation of consumption from production which results from the division of labor. At that stage of the division of labor when relationships between people have been largely transformed into exchange relationships, and the rules of human conduct increasingly take the form of the economic laws of a supposedly self-regulating social system, the idea of 'right' may practically disappear from the language philosophers use to account for behavior. They may speak of actions purely in terms of self-interest. As Adam

Smith, who usefully for our purpose combines an interest in moral philosophy and political economy, has unambiguously stated:

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantage.[7]

But other philosophers seem to realize that the functioning of the economic system is only apparently automatic and that the distribution of goods reflects the bargain struck between capitalists and workers. The need to speak in two voices to classes with opposed interests can lead such moralists to include contradictory elements in what is essentially a utilitarian description of ethics. Promise-keeping is vital to a contractual society like our own. The crucial relationship in an exchange economy is the buying and selling of labor-power; and the contract between capitalist and worker requires a moral sanction over and above mere market fluctuations. Therefore a writer on ethics like Ross, mainly utilitarian in outlook, may make a special place in his theory for a deontological treatment of the obligation to abide by contracts.[8]

Thus if we consider various attitudes toward morality over the whole period of commodity exchange, which may be conveniently dated from the appearance of a generally-recognized currency in circulation, we find that philosophers can be grouped according to whether they emphasize self-interest or respect for claims, hedonism or duty as the key to understanding human actions. But which of these two general views may be chosen is neither an accident nor a question of personal preference. Moralists who identify themselves with a rising class have a natural tendency to stress the satisfactions which will accrue to all once that class is in

a position of control. The very struggle for ascendancy gives a practical, materialistic cast to their thought and the hope of a better ordering of society makes them welcome change. Moralists who identify themselves with a class which has enjoyed power and is threatened from below have as understandable a tendency to stress obedience or duty as of primary ethical significance. Their conservative attitude makes them resist all change, which they describe as illusory anyway, and expectations of happier circumstances are referred to some ideal existence other than this present life. The distinction between an appeal to the utilitarian principle of happiness in this world or to duty sanctioned by other-worldly considerations follows from acceptance or rejection of the social movements of the period, and this acceptance or rejection determines whether satisfaction is ultimately to be sought within society itself or outside society in some ideal transfiguration of it.

Of course, it is not to be thought that the kind of reasons we have been considering for adopting one ethical attitude or the other are always conscious. A spokesman for a particular class may quite genuinely think he is speaking for society as a whole—indeed, his usefulness as an ideologist very likely *depends* on his thinking it. And even when he is aware of his class allegiance, he may, with the best will in the world, be as unreliable a guide in respect to the real rather than the professed interests of that class as an individual often is in respect to his own motives.

Class divisions and ethical ideas

As well as the influence on ethical attitudes of the coming to power and subsequent decline of successive classes reflecting the coming into being and supercession of fundamental modes of social production, there are also differences to be found in the ethical attitudes of contemporary classes

within the same society. As a result of the division of labor and its extension as a wider social division in terms of relationship to the means of production there is a tendency, as we have already noted, for societies to split into two broad classes—those primarily concerned with the laborious production of goods and those whose interest is centered in the possession and enjoyment of them. The moral ideas of these two groups are distinguishable because production and consumption from which they are respectively derived have become separated under a system of commodity exchange.

Production is social in the obvious sense that men must enter into close association with each other in the creation of useful things; but consumption is private and individualistic since no one else can satisfy our own needs for us. Production involves workers in a direct causal relationship with the physical environment by which satisfactory goods are recognized as the result of practical endeavor, while consumption in itself can give rise to the notion that the provision of goods is merely preceded by the desire for them. These goods represent for their producers certain specific amounts of expended energy, but to consumers they appear simply as abstract quantities of money which is itself an abstraction of an abstraction; and, furthermore, the surplus product which is alienated from those whose labor created it takes the form of a profitable increment to those who share in its acquisition. From these general observations can be deduced quite different ethical presuppositions which are characteristic of these two classes—a practical, down-to-earth, 'socialistic' morality in which there is a sense of alienation, and a reflective, abstract, acquisitive, individualistic morality in which there is a note of self-justification.

But of course only the moral attitudes of the class with a possession and consumption bias are likely to be expressed in published writings, expounded from platforms and taught in schools. One aspect of the division of labor is the distinction

between physical effort which is required of the class of workers and intellectual effort which is the special prerogative of spokesmen for the dominant class. And in any case, as Marx reminds us: "The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas," since "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production."[9]

This distinction between manual and mental labor enables us to see class relationships in the general terms of the Marxist dialectic of knowledge. A class intimately concerned with the physical world in the practical task of making things corresponds with the perceptual stage of understanding. A class at one remove from material reality, through not being under the compulsion of manual labor, a class for whom things are mediated by abstract money relationships, corresponds with the stage of abstract thought and inferential judgement.[10] Both tend to be arrested at a particular phase of the total act of knowledge and thus to fall short in different respects of the full understanding which requires all three moments—contact with the external world, conceptualization and logical rearrangement of sense impressions, and the application of these concepts in practice. The division of labor in dissociating the various stages of the productive process thus has the effect of disjoining the very phases of effective thinking.

Critics of Marxism often make the charge that identifying certain views with class interests is an attack on reason itself and opens the way for irrational forces to operate on the stage of history. But class-bias is not something Marx advocates or invents: it is a social fact to be recognized. Such recognition provides a critique of reason which not only shows its limitations in class-divided societies but also indicates the conditions under which these particular distortions might be eliminated. Knowing *why* we think as we do is a necessary step in correcting or changing our ideas.

Modes of production and ethical ideas

We have been considering how different attitudes toward morality can exist side by side in the same society, though only the attitude of the dominant class through its hired intellectuals is likely to be fully articulated and widely publicized. It is one of the tasks of history to try to recover by indirect evidence the beliefs and aspirations of the dominated at various periods in the past. We have also noted briefly that different attitudes toward morality succeed each other in time as changes occur in the fundamental economic structure of society. The Marxist view—that these changes, in influencing the way we think about ourselves and our relationships, give rise to altered ethical ideas—is historical materialism.[11]

If we consider some specific question of ethics, like the moral rules which ought to govern the actions of men in their trading relations with each other, we find entirely different attitudes prevailing at various stages of social development. There is no logical reason within morality itself why these attitudes should change so radically, why the opprobrium attached to making a profit at one period should have turned into approval at another. The cause of the change must lie in the material circumstances in which thinking about ethics takes place.

Few serious writers on the history of human thought would deny that there is at least *some* connection between what men are thinking at any particular time and the socio-economic conditions in which they find themselves. But granting the connection there could still be differences about which of the related terms was the predominant factor. The three possibilities may be illustrated by Marx's historical materialism which places the emphasis on economic relationships while recognizing the part ideological considerations may play once they have crystallized, Max Weber's

theory that the spirit of a particular mode of production like capitalism must precede the development of capitalist institutions, and R. H. Tawney's compromise between the two —that sometimes the ideal, sometimes the material takes precedence.

Now this is the same epistemological problem that confronts us in any attempt at philosophical interpretation of the nature of reality. Is the objective world to be deduced from pure ideas or are ideas a characteristic of a certain form of life which has developed in the objective world? And if the latter view is adopted, are ideas a mirror-like reflection of reality or do they play a dynamic role in subsequent stages of development? Or, to put the same questions in philosophical terms: are we idealists or materialists? And if we are materialists, is it mechanical or dialectical materialism we are subscribing to? Such questions can be debated endlessly without any hope of resolution; but debating them endlessly is tacitly to have assumed an idealistic attitude. We can only decide which assumption is more nearly true by considering whether holding one or the other yields the more fruitful consequences—not on the opportunistic, pragmatic grounds that what works is true but on the genuinely practical assurance that what is true works. Which assumption, for example, has proved the sounder thesis in respect to the advance of our physical knowledge of the universe—the view that nature is merely the phenomenal aspect of mind and can be known deductively from the logical categories of thought, or the view that nature is the objective context in which minds have developed with discoverable laws of its own? Similarly, the only proof of historical materialism is whether it gives us a better understanding than any alternative hypothesis of human relationships and the causes of social change, thereby enabling us to control our future as men working and living

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together—much as an understanding of physical laws has given us our control over nature.

It is worth considering changes in the ethical attitude toward trading operations a little further, since the growth of commodity exchange is such an important social development for the general argument of this study, and since the chronology of events and ideas in the course of this development certainly appears to support the thesis of historical materialism.

The social roots of barter are to be found ultimately in the most primitive form of the division of labor—clan specialization inside the tribe with respect to gathering a particular edible plant or animal, a practice reflected in totemism. Indeed, taboo, originating as a prohibition on eating a certain kind of food where and when it was found in order to effect subsequently a proper interclan distribution, can be seen as the earliest instance of the interdiction of use which is an essential precondition for commodity exchange. Further specialization in agriculture and in the making of such objects as pots or weapons effects a greater production of certain things than the community needs and this leads to intertribal barter in which local chiefs exchange their surplus for the surplus of other communities. This traffic in goods has the result of transforming all social relationships. Artisans

> cease to be workers for the community and become workers for themselves. . . . The chiefs cease to represent the separate interests of their clans. They are becoming a landed aristocracy united against the poorer clansmen by a common interest of class against class. The artisans on their part organize themselves in guilds formed on the pattern of the clan; but, so long as the economy remains agrarian, they are not in a position to dispute the supremacy of the landowners.

The process in ancient Greece by which tribal settlements, based on the equal sharing of goods by lot, were converted into city-states "governed by a landed nobility and surrounded by a poverty-stricken peasantry in dependent villages" is fully explained by George Thomson.[12]

> The new unit was the expression of a new division of labour, agrarian and industrial, which, once established, promoted further divisions of labour and thereby raised human life to new levels of complexity on a slave basis. . . . The later its date, the more pronounced was its class character. . . . During the sixth century (B.C.) the development of commodity production precipitated, in all the advanced city-states, a further revolution—the overthrow of the landed aristocracy by the merchant class.

This background helps us to understand the very different attitudes toward trade of Plato and Aristotle. As one who identified himself with the landed aristocracy Plato considered the whole business of exchange so reprehensible that in his ideal Republic it was to be kept to a minimum and only carried on by a despised group of foreigners whose activities were regulated by the strictest rules of 'fair practice'. Aristotle, taking a more sympathetic interest in mercantilism, distinguished between money-making insofar as it was a necessary aspect of sound house-keeping, from which the word 'economics' comes, and money-making as an end in itself. The former was natural and commendable while the latter was to be censured

> for it has not its origin in nature, but by it men gain from each other; for usury is most reasonably detested, as it is increasing our fortune by money itself, and not by employing it for the purpose it was originally intended, namely exchange.[13]

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, following on the collapse of the Roman Empire and, later, the shutting of the Mediterranean to European trade by Islamic expansion, much of Western Europe was split up into self-sufficient manorial units fairly closely approximating the Platonic ideal of a natural economy; and the philosophy of Plato, with its

contempt for commerce and its otherworldly values was well suited to influence early Christian ideas about the morality of trade. Saint Augustine's description of value as purely subjective is characteristic of a point of view determined primarily by the interests of consumers; and his doctrine that no Christian ought to be a merchant accorded well enough with the conditions which were to prevail for some time. With the revival of trade following on the Crusades, Aristotle was rediscovered. In the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, whom he so greatly influenced, a crude form of the labor theory of value can be found side by side with a subjective theory; and the economic incentive of private property is defended on the basis of the Aristotelian argument that not the institution of property itself but the manner of using it determines whether it is good or evil. In the earlier period all commercial activity, natural in Aristotle's sense or not, was regarded as a distraction from a man's true business of purifying his own soul and contemplating eternal values; and the abusive word 'usury' was applied to almost any profitable transaction. In the latter period profiteering or the charging of excessive interest on money was condemned but there was considered to be such a thing as legitimate trading whose limits were fixed by ethical notions like a fair return or a just price. In both cases the approach was moral; but while one form of morality required men to turn away from the things of this world, the other attempted to order their activities here and now.

What happened to change further these moral attitudes? Quite obviously the growth of towns and the expansion of trade with the revival of mercantilism. The views of a landed nobility whose interests were largely those of consumers were being challenged by the views of a rising merchant class; and this clash of views was the reflection of the beginnings of a class struggle which was eventually to overthrow feudalism

altogether. The Church itself was gradually forced to retreat from its original position on the ethics of trading and to accept various qualifications on the idea of the just price. By the fifteenth century Saint Antonino, while still insisting on the general notion of fair dealing, is prepared to recognize the 'impersonal forces of the market' with his admission that "there was a debatable ground within which prices might move without involving sin."[14] Similar qualifications were accepted in respect to usury by conceding that lenders might be reimbursed for losses incurred or for delays in repayment and even for chances of gain which had been missed.

Not only does the temporal sequence show that a quickening of commercial life was the direct occasion for a transformation of ethical attitudes, but also the very locale of these changes in attitude emphasizes the causal connection between economics and morality. The impetus to trade by the discovery of the New World would lead us to expect a rethinking of the ethics of mercantilism to appear in Spain; and in the School of Salamanca churchmen do begin, early on, to modify their views of usury by distinguishing between divergence in place and divergence in time in order to justify the exchange bills which had become a feature of trade fairs. But although theologians might make concessions to the economic needs of the time, the Church could never wholly abandon its prerogative of drawing precepts from the realm of the ideal. As the gulf between precept and economic practice widened, the ideal foundation on which the precepts rested could only be saved by giving up the claim that they had a direct relevance to practical affairs.[15]

Once we have reached the stage of a full-blown, freely competitive market economy in which overcharging for goods or the use of money seems to be penalized automatically, injunctions against usury in any form tend to become a thing of the past.[16] In the same way that human

relationships in the productive process are transformed from personal ties into commodity deals, so the ethics of commerce is translated into a purely descriptive science of market operations. Freed from any obvious role in regulating the great issues of the creation and distribution of the goods by which society lives, morality in capitalist countries suffers a progressive trivialization by which it becomes primarily concerned with those personal areas of life relatively impervious to commodity exchange—sexual and family relationships. It must not be thought, however, that even these most personal aspects of life are left untouched by the change from one mode of production to another. Marx mentions the fate of Don Quixote as a pathetic example of what happens to anyone who thinks that a particular code of conduct is compatible with all economic forms of society.

This translation of the ethics of commerce into a descriptive science does not mean that the functioning of the economy has ceased to have moral implications—only that they have temporarily sunk out of sight and are no longer debated as such. It remains for political opposition to the system as a whole to bring these implications once more into the open where they can be reconsidered in normative judgements.

Now through all these changes in ideas about trading relationships which reflect material changes in the basic mode of production it is still possible for the spokesmen of different periods to speak to each other across the centuries. Plato and Aristotle may differ from each other about the ethics of exchange, and their views may be at even greater variance with the attitudes of philosophers writing since their time; but they are all sufficiently concerned with a common subject matter for us to realize that there is a general philosophical language in which their differences are expressed. Marxists cannot explain this in terms of an essential human

nature which stays the same from generation to generation. Human nature, like the consciousness peculiar to human beings, is determined by social existence. Therefore similarities in ways of thought must be accounted for by common features in the way societies at various times are organized. In spite of the revolutionary disjunctions in any story of social development which stretches from the slave-based mercantilism of ancient city states through various forms of feudalism right up to contemporary capitalism, all these modes of production have at least two general characteristics in common—the division of labor, with the division between ruled and rulers as one of its consequences, and the creation of commodities as evidenced by the existence of some form of currency. At each of these periods society was divided into classes and there was at least some production for the market. Since we have found that these two aspects of the material conditions of life are fundamental for the deduction of our most general ethical concepts, their presence in various epochs provides the basis for a common moral language.

The key concept in this language is value. Value, as we have seen, by virtue of being a concept common to both economics and ethics serves as the middle term enabling us to move logically from one to the other. Just as the law of value is the economic formula for reuniting the activities of making and enjoying which have been sundered by the division of labor, so the general idea of value is the philosophical formula for comprehending the connection between material base and the broad cultural superstructure raised upon it.

Economic value operates across the division of labor to relate man as enjoyer to man as maker: value in its broadest sense operates across class divisions to relate man as ideologist to man as the creator of material goods. This connection has been obscured for us by the separation between manual and intellectual tasks, which has divorced doing from thinking;

and it is only by reminding ourselves that the source of all value is human effort that the connection can be recovered. Since value has this peculiar importance in commodity-exchanging societies of containing within itself the clue to the real social relationships concealed behind deals in things, the views about value which philosophers profess at any time, even when they represent genuine failures in comprehension or conscious attempts to mislead, are themselves revealing in terms of trying to understand that particular age.

But if attitudes toward value in general give us the moral framework within which men reflect on matters of conduct, it is the form *surplus* value takes which largely determines what specific ethical details shall be filled in. The idea that certain actions are 'right' holds for all societies; but in any particular society the actual type of conduct advocated as 'right' and the reasons adduced for its rightness depend on how the surplus product in that society is created and distributed.

In a tribal economy which has advanced beyond the mere subsistence level but in which the means of production like land are held in common, all right is group right and the morality of the tribe consists in absolute group loyalty. Every member of the tribe is a brother; everyone outside the tribe is an enemy. There is no question of individual rights because there is no such thing as personal property. Ceremonies and rituals serve to ratify the bonds holding the tribe together and the threat of ostracism—of being excluded from the life of the tribe, which means moral if not physical death —is a sufficient sanction for insuring compliance with traditional practices.

Under feudalism, loyalty to the group as a whole is superseded by a hierarchy of obligations, corresponding to a mode of production in which serfs tied to the fields they till are constrained to fulfil by services or dues the economic

demands of an overlord, and overlords owe fealty to that king or conqueror who is the source of assigned rights in the land. This social organization is reflected in such metaphysical ideas as a scale of beings from man, up through the various ranks of angels to god himself, the grand seigneur—each creature with his duly allotted place which establishes his relationships with those above and below him. Production is more for use within natural feudal units than for exchange and this explains the relative permanence of this economic mode. As Epicurus has said, natural wants are limited by nature, while idle imaginings stretch to infinity. The commodity, money, as the equivalent of all created values, gives such idle imaginings a concrete form and where it circulates freely with a quickening of commercial activity, it carries a propensity to greed with it. Or as Marx has put the same idea in economic terms:

> In any given formation of society, where not the exchange value but the utility of the product predominates, surplus labour will be limited by a given set of wants, and there is no boundless thirst for surplus labour arising from the nature of production itself.

It is this absence of the drive for maximizing surplus value on the part of overlords which gives feudalism its stability and resistance to change. Conquerors come and go; overlords fight among themselves to engross more land and the labor attached to it; but the economic units of feudal society, more or less self-perpetuating communities ruled by tradition and custom, remain largely untouched.

Under capitalism, as has been previously noted, the full growth of commodity production has the effect of transforming human ties into economic relationships. In theory, individual rights attain their maximum expression since social relationships have been atomized and no one need recognize any master but money. But actually the creation of a

surplus depends on the purchase and exploitation of labor-power, and the contract between employer and worker sets the tone of an ethical system based on promise-keeping and contractual agreements.

The relationship between the source of surplus value in a particular mode of production and the moral ideas of that society can be shown even more concretely than by means of the general scheme just presented. After all, the whole purpose of the direct or indirect subjugation of one class by another is the extraction of surplus value. The existence of surplus value is the material condition for the relative freedom from the productive process of a privileged group who can devote its leisure to thinking about life and cultivating the arts of living.[17] Since philosophers normally belong to this group, they are naturally concerned with defending and, if possible, justifying the economic means of its continued support. Therefore in each age we shall find the greatest ethical concern involved with rationalizing the most intense forms of exploitation. The thinkers of fourth century B.C. Athens were interested in making out a case for slavery because slave-worked mines were the most obvious source of a surplus. In the period of capitalistic imperialism considerable stress is laid on the responsibility for relieving inferior peoples of their ignorance and, incidentally, of their natural wealth since they are unable to make a proper use of it themselves. In these cases the terms of the argument are dictated by the principal source of surplus value which may or may not be characteristic of the whole economic life of the community. Its importance is drawn not from its pervasiveness but from its direct provision of the surplus fund on which the privileged position of the ruling class most immediately depends. Discussions about the actual numbers of slaves in ancient Athens or the exact proportion of its total income which an imperialist country today takes out of its colonies

are not entirely relevant to this issue. What counts is whether slave-worked mines or the high and easy profits of overseas investment are the areas of the economy where exploitation is most intense and yields the greatest surplus. This distinction between general modes of production and particular forms of exploitation is necessary because slavery, serfdom and wage-labor are not mutually exclusive and cannot be completely identified with tribal conquest, feudalism and capitalism.

A Marxist analysis of philosophical ideas in a concrete historical period

Perhaps some of the general reflections that have been made about the relationship between the ethical views a philosopher holds and the social forces around him can be clarified by studying a concrete historical illustration. We have already had occasion to glance at the attitudes toward trade of Plato and Aristotle as stimulated by Athenian mercantilism. Let us consider a little further the differences on moral questions between these two thinkers living and writing in the same place at the same time; and let us see if we can understand why they still have something to say to us today and also why their relative influence has varied so much in intervening periods.

Athens in the fourth century B.C. was the scene of considerable social ferment; and this was reflected in the speeches and prose writings of the time as it had already been poetically adduced several generations before in the works of the great dramatists. Plato leaves us in little doubt that, in the welter of sectional interests, he speaks for a landed aristocracy whose rule had been challenged by a rising class of merchants and their political allies. His remedy for this subversion of a traditional order, as set forth in *The Laws* and

The Republic, is to freeze into a static caste system the division of labor on which a civilized society must be founded and to prevent any social mobility by the strictest control on trade and the severest penalties for amassing wealth beyond one's station.

Because the movements of the period were unfavorable to the interests of those with whom he identified himself, he wanted society to turn back to a pre-mercantile stage. His ideal state is, in fact, an imaginative reconstruction of the past—with this major difference from the real past: it has been carefully envisaged in such a way that this time it will not generate the present. In this imaginary Platonic state land is allocated to a certain number of founding families whose rights to it are secured by political settlement strengthened by religious sanctions. The land is worked by slaves who also perform all household chores. What little trade is permitted in this enclosed natural economy is in the hands of foreigners whose corruption by commerce is a matter of no concern. Their activities are under the control of market commissioners whose regulations are drafted in the interest of consumers.

From this ideal state are to be excluded all who might prove in any way disturbing to its stability: poets, not because a man of Plato's culture lacked a taste for the arts but because poetry in the hands of dramatists like Aeschylus and Euripides had been used to extol democratic institutions or to question traditional beliefs; Ionian scientists, because they also cast doubt on the superstitions required to make this rigid social system work and because the very growth of physical knowledge was closely associated with the expansion of trade which Plato deplored; and sophists, because as the teachers of the Athenian middle class they put at the disposal of free citizens, in exchange for a fee, the sort of education in philosophy and rhetoric which had been the prerogative of

noble youths. What made the sophists particularly objectionable from Plato's point of view was their criticism of the conventional discrimination between Hellenes and barbarians, noblemen and commoners, freemen and slaves on the grounds that such distinctions were not based on natural differences but on man-made rules.

With all menial tasks performed by slaves and all trade in the hands of a closely-supervised foreign community, the free-born citizens of the Republic have no occupation but purifying their own souls and keeping inferior persons to their proper tasks. This is not expressed as a privilege but as a duty; and if any free citizen *should* stray from the pursuit of abstract goodness into some trade or craft, the urban commissioners are required to correct him by reproach and degradation until he be brought back into the right course.[18] The institution of slavery on which this whole strictly-divided society rests is justified on the basis of the natural inferiority of those who are forced to perform all labor.

> And why do you think that mechanical work and work with one's hands are matters of reproach? Is it not because in some people the element of the best is naturally weak and unable to rule the monsters within them? . . . Well, then, is it not in order . . . that we say they must be the slaves of that best man in whom the divine dwells?[19]

Since labor is the function of contemptible creatures who deserve their slave-status, we would hardly expect Plato to accord it any value. And the goods produced by such unworthy means are not to be highly regarded. "Which class of things do you think has greater participation in pure being, the class containing bread and drink and meat and food generally, or the class containing true belief and knowledge and mind and, in short, all virtue?"[20] This contempt for the material goods which are provided by servile effort leads to a certain strain of asceticism in Plato's thought; but just as true

belief does not of itself sustain life, so virtue is not simply its own reward. What is given away with one hand in an act of disdainful renunciation is hastily grabbed back again with the other. "Can there now be any harm in our going further and restoring to justice and the rest of virtue the rewards . . . which it renders to the soul at the hands of gods and men, both in a man's lifetime and after he is dead?"[21]

It is on the basis of these socially-determined prejudices of Plato's that we can begin to account for his ethical ideas and even his metaphysical theories. The attempt to use the ideal not to control reality but to replace it is usually a sign of class frustration—like the daydreams in which an individual may indulge when the normal outlets for his ambitions are checked.[22] To this must be added that natural propensity of a leisure class to see the normal sequence of events in the productive process in a reverse order. Instead of satisfactions being necessarily preceded by an expenditure of effort involving direct contact with the physical environment, the desire itself is sufficient to command the results of the labor of others. This makes it appear that the idea of the required object actually determined its existence. Furthermore, as Plato shows quite clearly, the class contempt for those who do the work of society gets transferred in a sense to the very things they make. Ignorant shepherds, weavers and street-traders may have made a white cloak available in the market place; but such a cloak will become soiled in time and wear out. Only a man of superior intellect can extract from it the pure idea of whiteness, eternal and changeless, residing in a world beyond the reach of the ordinary senses which one unhappily shares with rude mechanics and merchants. It is not actual good things which have worth but the ideal conception of their goodness—just as though the mental effort of conceptualization could be substituted for the sweat and toil of creative labor as the real measure of value.

Of course, the freeing of concepts from their immediate circumstances is a necessary condition for the abstract thought which, as we have noted, is part of the process of knowledge. The division between mental and manual labor provides a social background favoring the development of such abstract thought; but the rupture between theory and practice resulting from this same division leads to conceptual thought becoming so cut off from the actual world in which it originates and to which it must be resubmitted for verification that it assumes a completely arbitrary independence. It is the prolongation of this arrested moment in the acquisition of true knowledge, when concepts are free of the restraints imposed by reality, which makes it seem plausible to deduce nature from the idea instead of the other way about. These same freely floating concepts, detached from the real world, are the source from which idealistic ethics derives its notion of a limitless but essentially meaningless moral liberty.

The most obvious difficulty with Plato's ascription of value to universal ideas simply by virtue of their purity and immutability is that evil and pain are just as much universal ideas as goodness; filthiness is as abstract and changeless a concept as whiteness. Such a point can only be overlooked by a member of that class enjoying a relatively sheltered existence in which filth, hunger and pain are not nearly so prominent as cleanliness, satiety and health.

This postulating of the Idea of Good as the supreme value from which all other values are derived is one of the aspects of Platonic philosophy which Aristotle most severely criticizes. Since such hypostatized 'goodness' cannot be brought into being by human effort, it must remain irrelevant to man's practical aspirations; and it is with just such practical interests and activities that Aristotle is primarily concerned.

Though he was much influenced by Platonism during

the long years he studied at the Academy, yet, as the son of a physician at the Macedonian court, his social background was quite different from that of his aristocratic tutor. In his youth he must have learned something of the Hippocratic science and throughout his life his writings reflect a practical turn of mind and an unfailing curiosity about the objective world. His concern with human activity prompts him to remark: "All people value most what has cost them much labour in the production; for instance, people who have themselves made their money are fonder of it than those who have inherited it."[23] This is at least a step in the direction of recognizing human effort as the source of all value. His interest in the real problems of contemporary Athenian society keeps his *Politics* from being utopian; and in this book he makes a lasting contribution to the study of economics when he explains that:

> The uses of every possession are two, both dependent on the thing itself, but not in the same manner, the one supposing an inseparable connection with it, the other not; as a shoe, for instance, which may be either worn or exchanged for something else.[24]

This is the earliest recognition of that distinction between utility and exchange value which has not only remained valid for economic thought right up to the present day but has also, as we have seen, profoundly influenced our ideas about ethics. In his theory of money as the measure of value in exchange Aristotle realizes that the problem of economic value is a question of equivalence, even if he is unable to press his analysis to the point of saying exactly what value is. As Marx observed:

> There was an important fact which prevented Aristotle from seeing that, to attribute value to commodities, is merely a mode of expressing all labour as equal human labour and consequently as labour of equal quality. Greek society was founded upon slavery, and had, therefore, for its natural basis, the inequality of men and of their labour-powers.[25]

The importance of the issue of slavery for any philosopher living at that particular time is shown by the fact that Aristotle devotes a large part of the very first book of the *Politics* to its justification—as if no state could exist at all till this foundation for it had been firmly established. He takes a middle course between the Platonic view that the authority of the master is derived from his superior virtue and the sophist view that not nature but law makes one man free and another a slave. Aristotle argues that some men are, in fact, slaves by nature and it is only fitting that they should live in abject subjugation; but their ranks ought not to include those captured in an unjust war and certainly not Hellenes.

More interesting than his sharing the common views of his day about slavery is his attitude toward an Athenian middle or professional class with whom he tended to identify himself. His prescription for a happy community is one in which the citizens of middle station preponderate and have in their hands the reins of government. From this notion of the middle class of men holding the balance in a properly ordered society between extremes of wealth or poverty Aristotle draws his definition of virtue.

> It is a middle state between two faulty ones, in the way of excess on one side and of defect on the other: and it is so moreover, because the faulty states on one side fall short of, and those on the other exceed, what is right, both in the case of the feelings and the actions; but virtue finds, and when found adopts, the mean.[26]

In a society rent by class divisions where there is a continuous threat of civil conflict, philosophers are very likely to stress the virtue of *measure* as a remedy for these social ills. The idea of 'measure' would have been precipitated anyway as an abstract concept by the commodity exchange of an early mercantile society. But 'measure' means something quite different to Plato and to Aristotle. For Plato it is the harmony which results when men of various classes have been

cajoled or threatened into knowing their place and never trying to move out of it. The music of the spheres is the heavenly echo of a social order on earth in which men faithfully keep to the circle assigned them. Indeed, rightness is conceived in terms of the purely abstract and intellectually satisfying demonstrations of geometry; but for Aristotle this same 'measure' is the mean between extremes as realized in an actual group of men, a middle class, which holds the balance against the opposition of classes at either end of the social scale. Aristotle rejects the Platonic harmony as a mere abstraction, something over and above society which cannot be brought within the range of practical interests.

> [Plato] says that the legislator ought to make all the citizens happy; but it is impossible that the whole city can be happy, without all, or the greater, or some part of it be happy. For happiness is not like that numerical equality which arises from certain numbers when added together, although neither of them may separately contain it; for happiness cannot be thus added together, but must exist in every individual, as some properties belong to every integral; and if the military [in Plato's ideal Republic] are not happy, who else are so? for the artizans are not, nor the multitude of those who are employed in inferior offices.[27]

This historical example illustrates the suggestion made before: that philosophers of a conservative nature who are trying to defend a threatened social order with which their own interests are identified tend to invoke duty sanctioned by considerations external to society as the standard of ethical conduct, while those philosophers whose interests lie with a firmly-established or rising class tend to appeal to the utilitarian principle of happiness in this world as a sufficient explanation of behavior. This consideration leads Plato and Aristotle to give quite different accounts of normative judgements in spite of their contemporaneity and close association in the same Athenian school. Plato would argue that

such judgements borrow their validity from an ideal world of pure concepts which our exile in this imperfect world of the senses, dimly reflecting that ideal reality, does not altogether keep us from knowing. Aristotle would find the justification of these judgements in practical considerations of what makes for a happy, useful life in the world we perceive around us.

Because they put forward these very different views in the general language of value, of what is worthwhile in man's life, they have continued to be read and appreciated by subsequent ages. But by their common concern with a specific source of surplus value in their own time, the institution of slavery in fourth century B.C. Athens, they are firmly rooted in the thought of their day. Philosophers in later periods will not always be so frank in their rationalizations and justifications of the particular forms of exploitation which support the privileged classes they identify themselves with.

Ethical relativism

The fact that ethical standards vary with changes in the economic basis of society and that even in the same period different classes may have very different moral attitudes, presents all who are concerned with questions of morality a serious problem. Ritual sacrifice seems abominable to people who may accept as natural the immolation of thousands in a 'reasonable' war. Robbery under certain circumstances, such as 'lifting' another tribe's cattle, may be considered a social duty while in another type of society it may be wrong to steal a loaf of bread for starving children. And even according to the same code at the same time, gambling in the streets for pennies may be an indictable offense while gambling in commodities for millions is highly respectable. Comparisons of this sort can lead to a relativistic attitude toward moral issues

which, at best, regards ethics as merely conventional with no possibility of validating conduct apart from its immediate relevance to a specific social situation and, at worst, brushes all ethical considerations aside cynically to clear the way for the operation of naked interest.

Marxism's first contribution to the problem is to bring some order into this chaos of conflicting moral standards by showing that at all periods since the disruption of primitive communistic tribal units different classes have had their distinctive norms of conduct; and, further, that at any particular period the pattern of socially-recommended behavior has reflected the mode of production prevailing at that time. Since these modes of production are historically limited in number and fairly determinate in form, general patterns of behavior derived from them are similarly limited and recognizable.

We have already noted that the Marxist assumption that thinking is influenced by considerations of class does not represent an attack on reason as such but provides a critique of reason. No more does class influence on ethical attitudes represent an attack on morality as such. To the charge that anything Marxism has to say about morality is invalidated by class subjectivism, it may be answered at once that all morality in the past has been subjective in this sense but, either consciously or unconsciously, has tried to pass for something more. In recognizing this subjective nature of morality in all class-divided societies, Marxism provides a critique of morals which paves the way for an advance in objectivity. Since the exploitation of man by man is the basis of divisions in society and the source of class subjectivism, an objective ethical attitude depends on eliminating such exploitation. Eliminating exploitation would establish the conditions for a greater degree of objectivity both because it expressed the aspirations of the vast majority of mankind as opposed to an oppressive

minority and because it would have destroyed the social basis of class subjectivism with its special pleading on behalf of sectional interests.

The transition from class-divided to classless society requires a change in the economic basis of society to a socialistic mode of production. Class relationships, as we have seen, are ultimately determined by the relations of different sections of the community to the means of production and only when the means of production belong to society as a whole can these divisional relationships be abolished. This change is not different in kind from fundamental alterations in the social basis which have occurred in the past. Any specific form of economic organization originates in time, develops its full potential, and then becomes a check on further progress. Ethical beliefs and practices, as the expression in terms of social relationships of the material conditions of life, show the same development and decline. As Marx has said: "Right [in the ethical sense] can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby."[28]

But understanding why conflicting moral claims have been urged on members of society at various times and places still leaves us with the question of how, without an absolute standard, any normative judgements can be validated. In part, this is a false problem, as can be seen by a comparison with the question of validating our descriptive knowledge of the objective world. It is not necessary to believe in the present possibility of absolute knowledge—that is, a knowledge so final that no further observation or study could add to it—in order to judge one proposition truer than another. The relative truth of propositions is determined by the relative degree of success in acting on them; and as long as the reality of the objective world, as the pre-existent context of human thought and action, is maintained, this practical approach to

epistemology does not degenerate into pragmatism. Thinking about ethics and acting in a moral way take place in the context of an existing society, and normative judgements are relatively valid to the extent that they express the real purposes implicit in that particular form of social organization. Even though societies change and in the transitional period there are conflicting ideas of 'right', the very expression of those conflicts will be more or less valid in the degree that they come to grips with the actual clash of interests involved in the change.

But Marxism does not leave the problem of relativism there. It does not simply shrug its shoulders at the sociological fact that in varying material circumstances moral systems have a different content. The nature of its critique of these systems implies a morality of its own which transcends them and indicates the practical changes which would have to take place in the basic conditions of society in order to support such a morality. Moral systems in the past, arising within class-divided societies, have represented either a dominant class's sanction to rule or an exploited class's consolation in suffering[29] or, perhaps, a spurious attempt to reconcile conflicting class interests—spurious because no practical remedy was suggested for the source of such conflicts in the basic social conditions. Since society was to go on being divided, any resolution of class antagonism had to wait on the realization of ideal utopias where either there was such an abundance of goods that no one need go without or where beings with no material bodies to sustain would no longer care about goods anyway. Even those who were extremely sceptical of the possibility, in either an earthly or heavenly future, of such paradises might still appreciate the usefulness of the promise of eventual bliss in persuading men who went without to moderate their claims here and now. Thus the very hope of a classless society of human brotherhood could itself

be turned into a class weapon in the hands of a dominant group.

Marxism has no faith in the efficacy of preaching brotherly love in material circumstances which militate against it. Instead, Marxism considers how those circumstances themselves can be changed by studying the means whereby the foundations for a classless social order can be established. Now in the context of moral systems based on various forms of class division, a theoretical and practical effort directed toward altering that very basis of morality is not merely relative to those other moral systems. It is absolute in the only sense in which we can ever know absolutes—as something that transcends a conflict irresolvable on the level at which it occurs and raises the whole issue to another level where entirely different conditions obtain.

Marxism is a completely radical approach to the whole question of morality because it envisages a fundamental change in the very conditions under which any thinking about morality takes place. What Marxism really says in normative terms is simply this: if you are serious about wanting a world in which men, all men, can work together in harmony, helping one another to realize the full human potential in each, then there is a certain kind of social organization you must struggle to achieve. And, further, it says: since "mankind only takes up such problems as it can solve, because the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation,"[30] this moral challenge to transform society only sounds when the practical means of its realization are at hand.

Ethical implications of changes in the mode of production

The economic base of society is not altered because men arbitrarily decide that the cultural and ethical superstructure

which might be raised on some other base would be preferable. Indeed, the relatively smooth functioning of the material machinery of society breeds a kind of utilitarian amorality in which economic rules can usurp the role formerly played by explicit moral codes. As long as an economic system appears to operate automatically and continues to hold out the promise of material benefits to the majority of those making up a particular society, it will not be challenged. A crisis in such a system, however, soon precipitates morality out of its solution with economic rules to resume its place as a distinguishable, though never an unrelated, realm of discourse. The basic ordering of society, having failed to achieve what might reasonably be expected of it, becomes once more a subject for normative speculation. An unresolved crisis in one mode of production must lead in time to its supercession by another. During the period of transition the ethical implications of these conflicting forms of social organization confront each other in fierce debate; and with the establishment of a new material foundation,

> the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, esthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.[31]

Present-day capitalism is in a state of crisis because certain inherent contradictions which were not crucial as long as the system could still extend itself geographically have been

forced into the open with a check to further expansion. Fully developed commodity production depends on a free market for ordering the outlay of capital among the various kinds of goods to be made; but maximizing profits, particularly when there is a tendency under free competition for the rate of profit to fall, requires the individual capitalist or groups of capitalists to try to gain control of the market in respect to the goods they themselves produce. Even if it were possible, by sacrificing the economies of large scale production, to introduce restrictions on trusts and combines in order to maintain a relatively free market, it would function too crudely and too sluggishly to preserve the delicate balance necessary in a highly industrialized country between investment in means of production and investment in consumable goods. Moreover, the drive for profits leads capitalists both to increase enormously the output of goods and to keep wages as low as possible; but limiting wages restricts the effective demand for these additional products. The attempt to evade this dilemma forces capitalists to seek markets abroad in order to turn their goods back into capital again; but this brings them into conflict with capitalists from other industrialized countries seeking the same remedy. The formation of cartels, like the growth of monopoly in a single country, merely reproduces on an international scale the effects of tampering with the freedom of the market while not replacing it with a rational scheme of production and exchange geared to people's real needs. The profit-incentive which is the primary impulse of capitalism creates large scale enterprises with an enormously increased productive capacity; but monopolization interferes with the operations of a free market which capitalism presupposes, and large-scale industry is incompatible with private ownership and control. Or, in Marx's terminology, the social forces of production are straining against the relations of production and, sooner or

later, the productive potential which capitalism laid the basis for must break out of the restrictive integument in which capitalism binds it.

Without considering these contradictions of profit-seeking in detail, it can be said that they manifest themselves as distortions which prevent the law of value from functioning effectively in maintaining a balance between different kinds of production or between production and distribution. The result is a forcible check on the growth of production and a period of decline in the economy as a whole till it has sunk to a more primitive level at which the law of value can come into proper play again.[32]

Since 'value' is the middle term which relates the economic base of society to its ethical ideas, we can describe this malfunctioning of the law of value in moral language. In the first place these critical economic dislocations amount, ethically speaking, to a growing disjunction between the efforts of those whose work is value-creative and the goods they can command or the respect they enjoy. Honest toil and skilled craftsmanship lose their value in the quite practical sense that they are inadequately rewarded or may even be denied any opportunity for employment at all. In a society where this disjunction has occurred there is, to begin with, a lessening correlation between social merit and economic recompense; and eventually, at a more advanced stage of deterioration, there is even a negative correlation. Not only does genuinely constructive work in any particular field cease to receive its due acknowledgement; but a monetary premium is placed on the most antisocial forms of activity. The dignity of human labor becomes ever more difficult to maintain when it is so obviously the parasitical and destructive elements which flourish under a system increasingly characterized by waste, speculation and appeals to people's baser motives. In fact, any justification of capitalism on the grounds that the right ethical principles could be the by-product of a market economy motivated by profit was an example of the naturalistic fallacy from the start, and it becomes more demonstrably absurd as time goes on.

This is not to suggest that justice would consist in disentangling for the purpose of payment the contributions of each separate individual to social production; but since production *is* social, distribution cannot reasonably be based on *private* ownership of property. Once capitalist private property has been established by divorcing the peasant from the land and the workman from the tools of his trade, it is not feasible to return to Locke's simple formula of deducing rights in specific things from the individual labor that produced them. Instead, property itself must be socialized by common ownership of the means of production, whereupon a *social* right in things will be established on the basis of the cooperative efforts of all who are associated in their production. In the present critical phase of capitalism neither an individual nor a social relationship properly exists between productive effort and appropriation, and thus there is no ground for a clear ethical deduction of 'right' in general from the material conditions of life.

But even if it were possible for the capitalist system to function in such a manner that there was a fairer sharing of goods among those whose efforts are value-creative, it would not meet the real point of Marx's moral critique. It is not simply distribution which is defective but production itself—the very process by which men objectify themselves in commodities that do not belong to them, that are directly determined neither in quantity nor quality by the real needs of humanity, that stand over against their creators as an alien world of things obeying laws which are largely irrelevant to the well-being of those who actually made them. Instead of prices serving as guides to economic decisions, price mainte-

nance becomes an end it itself which can only be achieved by such means as paying farmers not to produce or buying up vast quantities of food to be destroyed—and all in a world where over half the population is critically undernourished. Criminal waste of this kind cannot but be reflected in a moral crisis as grave as the economic. Those implicated in such a state of affairs inevitably tend, in Oscar Wilde's phrase, to know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

The split we have often noted between duty and pleasure, between work and enjoyment, has the effect of freeing desires from any natural context to be played upon by advertising and sales campaigns, so that demands can be artifically created for goods rather than goods being produced to meet real demands. The moral decadence of capitalist society is the consequence of an economic system which cannot absorb the values it is capable of producing and finds it profitable to divert human effort into the production of shoddy, ephemeral and harmful objects, thus wasting man's natural heritage to fill the world with things to which the name 'goods' can only be applied in irony. As the ultimate example of this perversion of man's productive ability can be taken the employment of his skill and energy in the attempted fabrication of a commodity whose only utility will be the massive destruction of fellow human beings while leaving property intact.

The full development of commodity exchange, by which human relationships become more and more a function of things, leads in time to the dehumanization of whole societies. In no other way can we account for the cruel barbarities of those countries which are industrially advanced and, on the assumption of a gradual evolutionary progress from lower to higher, ought to be considered the most civilized. Piles of human hair in extermination centers, preserved for

some possible economic use, are the final monument of a system which turns people into commodities. With the contraction of the area which capitalism has left for exploitation, the squeezing of surplus value from those territories still under economic control becomes more intense and the efforts of the peoples thus affected to liberate themselves are met by the most violent repression. In this situation citizens of capitalism's homelands are confronted with the necessity of making a vital normative judgement, of deciding whether to acquiesce in these brutal acts of moribund capitalism or to oppose them.

Actually of course there *is* no gradual evolutionary advance from lower to higher. Progress is discontinuous. Each of the modes of production we have considered must find conditions ripe for its inception, grow to its full extent and exhaust all its possibilities before giving way to a succeeding mode. Progress is discontinuous also in the sense that a society which experiences the fullest development of a particular mode of production, while generating the ideas which will help shape the next stage, may have become so encumbered with a bureaucratic and military apparatus, so encrusted with all the forms and institutions of an outworn ideology that it cannot itself be the immediate locus of revolutionary change. Such change will begin on the periphery of the system, where its organization is weakest.[33] This form of transition may be compared with many historical examples of a leapfrogging progression whereby people at a lower stage of social development encounter those at a higher, absorb all they have to teach and finally surpass them.

The moral crisis of capitalism is, then, a reflection of the economic crisis—not just some periodic depression, but the chronic underemployment or misuse of human skills and productive capacity. Just as a particular ordering of the material basis of society gives rise to a productive potential on

which its peculiar forms begin to act as a limitation, so it also gives rise to moral ideals which cannot be realized within its confines. Implicit in the development of capitalism was the promise to free men from subservience to others and abolish the relationship of subjection. What it actually did was to conceal the fact of exploitation behind a commodity deal—and, in its external relationships with technologically less-developed regions, it usually dispensed with any mask at all. From the law of value, as the fundamental principle of commodity exchange, was deduced by way of the equalization of human labor the idea of the equality of man; and this same principle both recalls the primitive formula that what a person has mixed his labor with ought to belong to him and points ahead to a rational and moral order in which the values produced socially will belong to a whole society. But the fact of surplus value, as a levy the class owning or controlling the means of production exacts from the class possessing only its own labor-power, negates these ethical ideas.

And yet to the very extent that capitalism fails to justify the economic and ethical hopes which were the motive force of its conquest of feudalism it is preparing the way for its own supercession. The same process which perverts and exploits human labor in setting up profits for a capitalist class as the sole aim toward which the energy of society is directed, also produces the agents of its own transformation—a propertyless proletariat with little stake in the present order and sound reasons for wishing to see it replaced. Not that it is simply the induced misery of a laboring class which leads to the overthrow of a particular form of society—people have lived at a bare subsistence level for long periods without revolting against their conditions. There must also be the awareness that some other form of social organization is possible; and this depends on the productive forces having attained such a level that further expansion is seen to be thwarted not by the

limits of man's ability but by arbitrary restrictions imposed in the interests of a ruling class. Workers who know that products which are the fruits of their labor could be made to last by using better materials or that good materials, the fruits of other men's efforts, should not be wasted on gimcrack products, inventors who see their ideas bought up simply to be suppressed, social scientists who are employed to use their understanding of human relationships to intensify exploitation, research workers whose facilities for experiment depend on a government's military expenditure, all may be brought to a realization that there *ought* to be some social system which would free their talents and energies for the unhampered creation of values that all men could share. This 'ought' crystallizes the moral impulse which cannot find its proper expression in the existing system.

Conscience and social consciousness

Everyone is born in a particular social environment and is subjected from his earliest days to a number of influences which guide his conduct and shape his very ideas about how he ought to behave. These conditioned responses become so habitual as to seem almost instinctive. They develop into an inner regulator of behavior that would continue to function for some time even if the social pressures by which it was originally determined were suddenly altered or removed. This internal censor governs conduct much as any memorized set of rules, the highway code or parliamentary procedure, regulates specific forms of activity like driving a car or organizing a meeting; but while such activities as these are optional, everyone has to live in society and therefore socially acceptable patterns of behavior as represented in the individual conscience have a much more compulsive force. This guidance from within is practically automatic except when

some occasion arises for acting against its dictates, whereupon one becomes acutely aware of it through a sense of uneasiness, a foreboding of disaster, a feeling of guilt. Since conscience is the individual's built-in compendium of social rules, to defy its injunctions is to act out in some degree the old tragedy of breaking a taboo and finding oneself ostracized from the tribal group.

Because all who grow up in society acquire a conscience and because all social groups have certain human relationships more or less in common, it is often supposed that the moral contents of everyone's conscience must be the same. The kind of sanction invoked in a particular society to give social rules greater force will also be used to explain the origin of the individual conscience: if such rules are taken to be prescriptions handed down from on high by some god, then conscience is described as the god-given faculty enabling the individual to appreciate the relevance of those rules to his daily life; if the rules of social behavior are deduced from an eternal and universal reason, then conscience is the individual's innate rationality by which he can recognize the compelling validity of such principles. Whatever the form of these sanctions, they rely for their authority on the assumption that they apply to all men under all circumstances.

But, in fact, conscientious behavior on the part of individuals reveals the same variety as the patterns of social mores which have characterized different societies with contrasting forms of economic organization or even different classes in the same society. In the latter connection it is hardly surprising to find that members of the working class in capitalist countries are most conscientious about solidarity with fellow workers in the same trade or industry, while members of the bourgeoisie are most conscientious about money matters and keeping one's word to other individuals. But sociological studies show that even in respect to those relationships which

all would seem to have in common, like attitudes toward sex and marriage and parental obligations, the classes diverge in what they naturally consider proper conduct. Differences in norms of behavior as rooted in the consciences of individuals with different social experiences become crucial for the moral philosopher when confronted with the familiar problem that men who it may be widely agreed have perpetrated the vilest acts in history often seem to have been perfectly sincere in believing that they were doing right and have given every indication of acting conscientiously. This has even led some writers on ethical questions to enter a plea for a life of personal indulgence as opposed to one of high moral endeavor on the ground that if the former achieves nothing to the benefit of other men it at least, unlike the latter, avoids the risk of doing any great harm either. But, of course, what is really wanted is a critique of the individual conscience, implying thereby a critique of the social order which that conscience happens to reflect.

In relatively stable societies, like the village communities of Asian feudalism in which life may have gone on virtually unchanged for centuries, the implanted consciences of individual members are in complete harmony with society's moral requirements and the whole ethical pattern of life is a more or less unconscious repetition of well-established customs. But in a situation of social mobility where individuals may be altering their class position or where classes themselves may be experiencing a change in their relationship to each other, people find that their consciences conservatively refer to a social context which no longer obtains. This inevitably involves the individual in a moral crisis; and conscience can offer no guidance since its irrelevance to present circumstances is the very source of the trouble. Such a crisis in which the fundamental principles of conduct no longer seem to apply can, in times of rapid social change, afflict whole soci-

eties with a general malaise. Various neuroses which psychiatrists attempt to treat in terms of complexes rooted in a personal past may often be individual instances of this widespread discrepancy beween private consciences and altered social conditions.

The therapeutic treatment implied by a Marxist approach to the problem is not unlike the effort to restore a patient to mental health by uncovering deep-seated disturbances and bringing to light unsuspected impulses—except that the cure is conceived in social rather than in individualistic terms. The private conscience must be raised to a level of awareness where its moral content can be studied and criticized: it must be seen for what it really is—which is simply unconscious group allegiance. Seeing it for what it really is transforms the private conscience into class consciousness. Once it is realized that conscience is the uncritical and instinctive form of one's sense of belonging to a particular class or group, it is possible to affirm those social ties consciously or, perhaps, if they do not seem to be in one's real interests, to break them in order to identify oneself with some other group. The problem of a conscience at odds with its social environment can only be resolved finally by a conscious choice based on the implications of belonging to one group or another as defined by the new situation. Insofar as this choice is made on the basis of one's own long-term interests, it is rational; insofar as it commits one to ethical standards formulated in the interest of the group, it is moral. The choice is quite fundamental since it amounts to a decision about what system of ethical standards one intends all future actions to be judged by.

Marxist morality consists in identifying oneself with the proletariat in its struggles against those who oppress and exploit it. By such a commitment one not only chooses the class morality by which one agrees to abide, one has also chosen a

course of action which will eventually resolve conflicting moralities into one embracing ethic reflecting the aspirations of all men in a single undivided society—because, of course, in eliminating all the classes above it, the proletariat also eliminates itself as a class. As Lenin has declared in answer to the question of whether Marxism is ethical:

> Of course there is such a thing as communist ethics. . . . But we repudiate all morality derived from non-human and non-class concepts. . . . We say that *our* morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat. . . . *Our* morality serves the purpose of helping human society to rise to a higher level and to get rid of the exploitation of labour.[34]

In this act of commitment one has not only taken a decision about one's own ethical conduct, one has expressed as well a practical concern for the conduct of all others by working for a form of social organization in which—because it is characterized by shared abundance rather than manipulated scarcities, because it is based on cooperation rather than competition—'being good' in the fullest human sense will not only be the right but also the natural thing to do. The ideal individual has been sought through the ideal society rather than the other way about. This attitude can be contrasted with the moral athleticism of those thinkers who, often in the comfort of their studies, are prepared to accept social injustice and human suffering as a sort of ethical challenge by which men test and improve themselves.

In stressing the *consciousness* of this fundamental moral choice it may be noted that it is a privilege of the historical time we live in to choose with greater awareness than ever before of what that choice entails. Past transformations of society resulting from the conflicts of classes have either taken place over so long a time scale that individuals at any particular period were practically unaware of the change, or else they have assumed obscure ideological forms like religious wars so

that people could not always recognize the nature of the economic interests at stake. The beginnings of feudal societies are never distinct enough for us to assign any but the most approximate dates to their origin. The change from feudalism to capitalism was marked by certain precise engagements in this country or that, but these often failed in definitiveness and were usually fought out under a confusing multiplicity of banners in respect to the social motives involved.[35] There has thus been a progression in history by which each successive transformation has been a more distinct event in time and a more conscious social change than the one preceding; and now in the capitalist world we are confronted with the most distinctive, the most sharply defined change of all—the transition from class-divided to classless society.[36] Few of us can pretend not to know what the issues are. Few of us, therefore, can be absolved of the responsibility of choosing what is socially right.

Chapter III

Moral Obligations or the Meaning of 'Ought'