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2nd Edition

Allen W. Wood

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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MARX ON RIGHT AND JUSTICE

1 Does Marxism have moral foundations?

From one point of view, Marx is very explicit about his reasons for condemning capitalism. He describes and documents the miserable conditions to which the working class is subject: their grinding poverty, the degradation and emptiness of their mode of life, the precariousness of their very existence. And he argues that these conditions of life are by no means natural or unavoidable, but are rather the artificial products of an obsolete and irrational social system which is not recognized as such only because it serves the interests of the privileged minority. Whether we agree or disagree with what Marx says on this score, it is at least fairly clear what he means, and it is difficult to deny that if what Marx says is correct, he has powerful grounds for attacking capitalism and advocating its overthrow.

But from another point of view, Marx has dissatisfyingly little to say about his reasons for denouncing capitalist society. He does not ask the sorts of questions philosophers are fond of asking about the assessment of social institutions. He takes no pains to specify the norms, standards, or values he employs in deciding that capitalism is an intolerable system. Marx may exhibit his acceptance of certain values in the course of attacking capitalism, but he seldom reflects on what these values are, or on how they might be justified philosophically. Whether or not this silence constitutes a serious lacuna in Marx's thought, it has certainly given rise to puzzlement on the part of his readers, and to diverse theories about the 'moral foundations' of Marxism. In the next two chapters, I will try to say something about Marx's treatment of moral norms (especially right and justice) and the relation of morality to Marx's historical materialism and critique of capitalism.

In Part One, I argued that Marx's views about alienation and the

human essence involve some definite views about the conditions under which human beings can sustain a justified sense of self-worth and meaning in their lives. More specifically, I argued that these views involve a recognizably Aristotelian conception of human self-actualization, the development and exercise of our 'human essential powers'. Further, I argued that Marx conceives of these powers most fundamentally as our powers of social production. These views (or some version of them) are regarded by many writers as constituting the 'moral foundations' of Marxism, or at least as an important part of these foundations. I think there are some good reasons why we should be reluctant to accept this common idea.

For one thing, alienation, or the frustration of human self-actualization, is not the only evil Marx sees in capitalism. Perhaps it is not even the primary evil denounced in his mature writings. Marx is at least as concerned about philosophically less interesting evils to which the working class is subject: hunger, disease, fatigue, and the scarcity and insecurity of the means of physical survival. Aristotle regarded all other goods (including the necessities of life) as good only insofar as they are accessories to the final human good of happiness as the actualization of our human potentialities. But there is no sign that Marx followed Aristotle at this point. Hence there is no reason to treat self-actualization through social production as fundamental to Marx's value system. The most we can say with assurance is that self-actualization is prominent among the elements of human well-being which Marx sees as frustrated by capitalism.

Thus we may doubt whether Marx's views about alienation and self-actualization are *fundamental* moral views. But it is also questionable whether these are *moral* views. No doubt there is a sense in which any far-reaching views about human well-being count as 'moral' views, and in this sense I would not deny that Marx's conception of human self-actualization is a 'moral' conception. But there is a narrower and I think more proper sense of 'moral' in which we distinguish *moral* goods and evils from *nonmoral* ones. We all know the difference between valuing or doing something because conscience or the 'moral law' tells us we 'ought' to, and valuing or doing something because it satisfies our needs, our wants or our conceptions of what is good for us (or for someone else whose welfare we want to promote – desires for nonmoral goods are not necessarily selfish desires). This difference roughly marks off 'moral' from 'nonmoral' goods and evils as I mean to use those terms here. Moral goods include such things as virtue, right, justice, the fulfillment of duty, and the possession of

morally meritorious qualities of character. Nonmoral goods, on the other hand, include such things as pleasure and happiness, things which we would regard as desirable and good for people to have even if no moral credit accrued from pursuing or possessing them.[1]

As I read him, Marx bases his critique of capitalism on the claim that it frustrates many important *nonmoral* goods: self-actualization, security, physical health, comfort, community, freedom. Of course the distinction between moral and nonmoral goods is never explicitly drawn by Marx, but it is a familiar one (both in philosophy and in everyday life) and it is not implausible to think that Marx might be tacitly aware of it and even make significant use of it without consciously attending to it.

Marx's condemnations of capitalism are often based quite explicitly on its failure to provide people with the nonmoral goods listed above, together with the claim that the existing powers of social production could provide them to all members of society if production were organized more rationally and democratically (i.e., socialistically). But Marx never claims that these goods ought to be provided to people because they have a *right* to them, or because *justice* (or some other moral norm) demands it.[2] In fact, as we shall see presently, Marx positively denies that capitalist exploitation does the workers any injustice or violates their rights. There is some evidence that Marx's own concern with the working class movement may be prompted in part by moral considerations (or at least by a distaste for the sort of person he would be if he were indifferent to human suffering).[3] But Marx seldom or never appeals to such considerations in urging others to support the movement. He is evidently persuaded that the obvious nonmoral value of the goods to which he appeals is sufficient, quite apart from appeals to our love of virtue or sense of guilt, to convince any reasonable person to favor the overthrow of a social order which unnecessarily frustrates them and its replacement by one which realizes them.

On the other hand, Marx consistently avoids social criticism based on moral goods or norms, and consistently shows contempt for those who do engage in such criticism. He attacks the 'moralizing criticism' of such people as Pierre Proudhon and Karl Heinzen, and rejects as 'ideological shuffle' (*ideologische Flausen*) the Gotha Program's demand for a 'just distribution'.[4] Likewise, he is angered by those who (like Adolph Wagner) interpret Marx himself as putting forward a critique of capitalism which is morally based.[5]

Marx never really makes explicit his reasons for taking these

attitudes. Any attempt to expound these reasons must be to some extent speculative. For my interpretation I claim only that it provides the best explanation I can think of for what Marx actually says, and it is not explicitly contradicted by anything in the texts.

The interpretation is this: Marx's conception of nonmoral goods is different from his conception of moral goods. Marx believes that judgments about the nonmoral good of men and women can be based on actual, objective (though historically conditioned and variable) potentialities, needs and interests of human beings. But he sees moral norms as having no better foundation than their serviceability to transient forms of human social intercourse, and most fundamentally, to the social requirements of a given mode of production. Marx's attitude toward social criticism based on appeals to the two sorts of goods varies accordingly. Capitalism can be condemned without any ideological mystification or illusion by showing how it starves, enslaves and alienates people, that is, how it frustrates human self-actualization, prosperity and other nonmoral goods. But Marx rejects moral norms (such as right and justice) as acceptable vehicles of social criticism or apologetics (at least in situations of fundamental social revolution, where the entire framework of a given mode of production is to be challenged or defended.) He does so because such norms are for him only the juridical and ideological devices by which a given mode of production enforces its social relations, or a class attempts to promote its own interests. Moral consciousness, moreover, typically masks the real basis of its norms: it represents them as proceeding not from historically transient social forms but from the will of God, or *a priori* laws of reason, or our natural moral sense, or the general happiness of sentient creatures. When morality is detached from its real social basis (as by reformers who attempt to represent capitalist distributions as unjust) it becomes both irrational and impotent. Even when moral judgments are founded on this basis, their content is best understood not in morality's own mystified language, but in terms of the social structures they serve and the class interests they represent.

This rather negative attitude toward the rational foundation of morality is implied in Marx's unrelenting contempt for morally based social criticism. But it is also made more explicit in several places. *The German Ideology*, for instance, claims that historical materialism has 'broken the staff of all morality', by exhibiting the connection between morality and the conditions of life out of which it arises. When an imaginary bourgeois critic charges that 'communism does away with religion and morality instead of forming them anew', the

Communist Manifesto does not deny that the charge is true, but replies to it by observing only that 'the communist revolution is the most radical break with traditional property relations; no wonder that in the course of its development there is the most radical break with traditional ideas.'[6] Presumably 'doing away with morality' is part of this radical break.

The distinction between moral and nonmoral goods is certainly one of which moral philosophers have been aware. Kant is cognizant of it when he distinguishes the 'moral' from the 'natural' (or 'physical') good, or the 'good' (*Gut*) from 'well-being' (*Wohl*). Mill acknowledges it when he distinguishes the 'utilitarian theory of life' (a hedonistic theory of the nonmoral good) from the 'utilitarian theory of morality' (which holds that the moral good consists in what is conducive to the greatest nonmoral good).[7] The distinction even makes possible two of the most basic issues on which Kant and Mill disagree:

(A) Does the pursuit of moral good ultimately diverge from the pursuit of nonmoral good?
(B) Which good is the more fundamental and (if the two ever do conflict) the overriding human good?

On issue (A), Kant returns an affirmative answer, while Mill gives a negative one. Kant, of course, does not think the two kinds of good are incompatible or diametrically opposed, only that what morality demands is sometimes in conflict with the greatest nonmoral good (which Kant sees as the welfare only of the sensuous part of our nature). Mill recognizes that the moral good may conflict with particular lots of nonmoral good (a particular pleasure, or the happiness of a particular person or group). But since what is morally good is determined by what is conducive to the greatest total nonmoral good, there can be no ultimate divergence.

On issue (B), Kant holds that the moral good is the unconditioned good, which must take precedence whenever the two goods conflict. Mill, since he sees morality as merely a device for maximizing the total nonmoral good, holds the nonmoral good to be fundamental.

As I read him, Marx agrees with Kant on issue (A) and with Mill on issue (B). But this means that unlike either of them, Marx holds that the nonmoral good can systematically override the moral good in certain situations. (I think this is in effect what Marx is doing when he advocates the overthrow of capitalism while agreeing – at least verbally – with its bourgeois apologists that it is just.) Another way in

which I think Marx differs from both Kant and Mill is that their theories of the nonmoral good are hedonistic, while Marx's is not.

The idea that Marx does not regard capitalism's inhuman exploitation of the workers as unjust or as a violation of their rights may be a hard one to accept, or even to understand. Yet at the same time, Marx's view on his point and his reasons for holding it constitute important evidence for my interpretation of Marx on morality. Hence although I have treated Marx's conception of right and justice more fully elsewhere, I will devote the remainder of this chapter to a brief discussion of it.[8]

2 Marx's concept of justice

According to historical materialism, people's moral beliefs and the motives to adhere to them are part of the 'ideological superstructure' of society. Engels says: 'Consciously or unconsciously, men create their moral intuitions in the last instance out of the practical relations on which their class situation is founded – out of the economic relations in which they produce and exchange.'[9] Historical materialism proposes to explain the social influence of moral beliefs by the way in which they contribute to the basic economic tendencies in the society in which they are found. And it proposes to account for the content of these beliefs by the way it helps to stabilize a social system or to promote class interests.

Historical materialism tries to explain why people have the moral beliefs they have. To do this, however, is not yet to say which (if any) of these beliefs are correct, or to provide any basis for answering questions of this kind. There are indications, however, that materialist explanations do for Marx have implications for the correctness of moral beliefs and moral judgments. More specifically, Marx seems to regard the correctness of some moral judgments as turning on the way in which people's conduct is related to the prevailing production relations.

One important moral notion which Marx treats in this way is that of right (*Recht*) or justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). In *Capital*, he says:

> The justice of transactions which go on between agents of production rests on the fact that these transactions arise out of the production relations as their natural consequences. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as voluntary actions of the participants, as expressions of their

> common will or as contracts that may be enforced by the state against a single party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They only express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it.[10]

When Marx says that a just transaction is one which 'corresponds' or is 'adequate' to the mode of production, he means, I think, that it harmonizes with and performs a function relative to it. An unjust transaction, by contrast, is one which 'contradicts' the prevailing mode, which clashes with it or is dysfunctional relative to it. To make a scientific judgment on the justice or injustice of a particular transaction or practice therefore requires both that we understand the workings of the productive mode we are dealing with, and appreciate the functional relationship this transaction or practice has to this system of production. Thus Engels says that 'social justice or injustice is decided by the science which deals with the material facts of production and exchange, the science of political economy.'[11]

Marx's concept of justice is not relativistic. Whether a given transaction is just or unjust does depend for Marx on its relationship to the mode of production of which it is a part, so that transactions which are just in the context of one mode of production would be unjust in the context of another. But one does not have to be a relativist to believe that the justice of an act depends on the circumstances in which it is performed. A relativist is someone who holds that certain specific actions are right or wrong, just or unjust only 'for' (as judged by) some individual or culture or epoch, that there is no saying whether an act is right or just unless we specify the subject relative to which the judgment is made. The Marxian concept of justice, however, involves no view of this kind. If, for example, a historical analysis of the role of slavery in the ancient world shows that this institution corresponded to the prevailing mode of production, then in the Marxian view the holding of slaves by the ancients was a *just* practice, not only 'for them' but also 'for us', and indeed 'for' anyone. The judgment that ancient slavery was unjust, whether it is made by contemporaries of the institution or by moderns reading about it in history books, would simply be wrong.[12] When Marx and Engels say that people at different times and places have held diverse views about the nature of 'eternal justice', they are not espousing relativism; they are rather arguing that there are no 'eternal' rational principles or formal criteria of justice, applicable irrespective of time and

circumstances. As Engels puts it, truths about morality 'belong to the domain of human history'. They are objective, empirical truths about the functional relation of acts or practices to the social structures in which they take place.[13]

Marx gives no argument for his conception of justice, but the reasoning behind it is probably something like the following: Historical materialism holds that the concept of justice is socially important and socially potent because of the way in which standards of justice sanction the production relations corresponding to the current state of a society's productive forces. It also holds that these standards have the content they do at a given time because of the way in which that content sanctions the particular form of production then prevailing. To the extent that materialists are successful in making a case for these claims, they can show that if a society adopted standards of justice different from its actual ones, treating as just what it currently treats as unjust, then production under the existing conditions could not function as smoothly or efficiently as it does, and as it must tend to do if the postulates of historical materialism are to hold. Consequently, there is a strong tendency, founded on materialist considerations, for those standards of justice to prevail which sanction practices corresponding to the existing mode of production. Further, it is only insofar as moral standards serve the function of sanctioning social relations that they exist. Standards which are at odds with prevailing relations do not fulfill the function proper to moral standards. Hence they must be not only socially impotent but also wrong, because they are at odds with the proper social function of morality. Material production thus provides a basis for moral standards, the only real basis Marx thinks they can have. For Marx, as for Hegel, the morally rational is determined by the socially actual.

3 Capitalism and commodity exchange

We can see Marx's concept of justice in operation when we turn to his treatment of the question whether the appropriation of surplus value by capital involves any injustice to the workers, or any violation of their rights. A number of socialists in Marx's day (Pierre Proudhon, Thomas Hodgskin, John Bray, among others) argued that capitalism involves an unequal (and hence unjust) exchange of commodities between worker and capitalist. Their argument was based on Ricardo's principle, adopted in a slightly modified form by Marx himself, that labor is the sole creator of exchange value and that 'the value of a

commodity . . . depends on the relative quantity of labor necessary for its production.'[14] Workers, these socialists pointed out, hire themselves out to the capitalist for a definite wage, and are supplied by the capitalist with means of production which are productively consumed in the labor process. At the end of this process, however, a worker has produced a commodity of greater value than the combined values of the wages paid and the means of production consumed. That the 'surplus value' (as Marx calls it) should be appropriated by the capitalist is an injustice, according to these socialists. For according to Ricardo's principle, the worker's labor is responsible not only for the value paid in wages, but for the surplus value as well. Hence surplus value must arise because capitalists pay workers less in wages than their labor is worth. If capitalists paid workers the full value of their labor, no surplus value would result, and the demands of just and equal commodity exchange would be satisfied.[15]

Marx rejects both this account of the origin of surplus value and the claim that surplus value involves an unequal exchange between worker and capitalist. He sees this explanation of surplus value as at bottom no different from the one given by Sir James Steuart and others before the physiocrats, that surplus value originates from selling commodities above their value.[16] The socialists merely turned things around and explain surplus value by supposing that labor is purchased below its value. Both explanations make surplus value appear the result of mere accident, and are therefore inherently unsatisfactory.

The main flaw in the argument that surplus value involves an unequal exchange, as Marx sees it, relates to the phrase 'the value of labor'. Strictly speaking, according to Marx, labor itself cannot be said to have value.[17] In the socialists' argument, the phrase 'value of labor' is used to denote two different values. It denotes, on the one hand the *value created by labor*, the socially necessary labor time expended on the commodity and added to the value of the means of production consumed in making it. It is in this sense that the capitalist pays the worker less than the 'value of his labor'. But as Marx points out, it is not the value created by labor that the capitalist pays for. The capitalist does not buy finished commodities from the worker, less the amount of means of production consumed. Rather, capitalists buy, in the form of a commodity, the workers' capacity to produce commodities for them, they buy what Marx calls 'labor power' (*Arbeitskraft*). In the capitalist labor process, capital is merely making use of what it has bought antecedent to the process. 'As soon as [the worker's] labor

begins, it has already ceased to belong to him; hence it is no longer a thing he can sell.'[18]

The *value of labor power*, like the value of any commodity, depends on the quantity of labor socially necessary for its production. In other words, the value of labor power depends on the quantity of labor necessary to keep a worker alive and working, or to replace a worker who dies or quits. Now Marx's theory of surplus value *postulates* that all commodities, including labor power, are bought at their values.[19] Hence Marx's theory of surplus value postulates that the exchange between capitalist and worker is an exchange of equal values, and hence, on the very principle of justice used in the socialists' argument, a *just* transaction. Surplus value, to be sure, is appropriated by the capitalist (as Marx often says) without paying the worker an equivalent for it.[20] But there is nothing in the transaction that requires any payment for it. The exchange of wages for labor power is the only exchange between capitalist and worker. It is an equal exchange, and it is consummated long before the question arises of selling the commodity produced and realizing its surplus value.[21] The capitalist buys a commodity (labor power) and pays (Marx postulates) its full value; by using, exploiting, this commodity, capital acquires a greater value than it began with. The surplus belongs to the capitalist; it never belonged to anyone else. 'This circumstance', says Marx, 'is peculiar good fortune for the buyer [of labor power], but no wrong or injustice (*Unrecht*) at all to the seller.'[22]

Nevertheless, it might still seem that Ricardo's principle could be used to argue that the appropriation of surplus value by capital does an injustice to the worker. Ricardo's principle says that labor is the sole creator and the very substance of value, that means of production only increase in value insofar as labor time is expended on them. It seems to follow that the entire increase ought to go to the worker, since it is through labor alone that it comes about. 'The labor of a man's body, and the work of his hands,' as Locke puts it, 'are properly his.'[23] By appropriating surplus value, capitalists may not be engaging in an unequal exchange with workers, but they are (in Marx's own words) 'exploiting', even 'robbing' them, reaping the fruits of their 'unpaid labor'. Surely Marx must regard this exploitation and robbery as unjust. I think it is really this argument that we attribute to Marx when we are tempted to take his denunciations of capitalism as denunciations of injustice.

The argument has two main premises. The first is that surplus value arises from the appropriation by capital of part of the value created by

labor for which the worker receives no equivalent. The second is that each person's property rights are based on that person's labor, so that each person has a right to appropriate the full value created by that labor, and anyone who deprives a worker of this value can be said to have done the worker an injustice. Marx plainly accepts the first premise. Does he accept the second? We saw in Chapter 3 that Marx, like Locke, views appropriation as a basic function of human labor. But unlike Locke, Marx does not regard this appropriation as determining any particular form of social property or (what is the juridical expression of the same thing) any determinate property rights.

Marx recognizes, of course, that the notion that property rights are based on one's own labor is common among bourgeois ideologists, and he even sees reasons why this notion should seem plausible.

> Originally property rights appeared to us to be based on one's own labor. At least this assumption must be made, since only commodity owners with equal property rights confronted each other, and the only means of appropriating an alien commodity was by alienating one's own commodities, which could only be replaced by labor.[24]

In a mode of production where individual producers own their own means of production, property rights would be based exclusively on one's own labor, and surplus value would not exist. But the reason for this would simply be that since there is no separation of labor from the means of production, there would be no need for these means to take the social form of capital, and no need for labor to take the form of commodity, labor power.

In capitalism, however, labor power appears as a commodity on an ever-increasing scale. Labor power, however, is only purchased to be used, and cannot function as a commodity if it is not useful to its purchaser. If the entire value of the commodity produced were expended by capital in wages and means of production, then the capitalist would have received no use from the labor power he purchased, and would have done better simply to convert his purchasing power into commodities he could consume. If capital realized no surplus value, capitalists would have no incentive to develop the forces of production, and no occasion to engage in that prudent abstinence for which they are rewarded by God and man alike. Hence the appearance of labor power as a commodity brings about what Marx calls a

'dialectical reversal' of the previously assumed rights of property: under capitalism

> property turns out to be the right on the part of the capitalist to appropriate alien unpaid labor or its product, and on the part of the worker the impossibility of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labor has become the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity.[25]

4 Capital exploits justly

Given Marx's concept of justice, capital's exploitation of the worker is just. The justice of transactions in capitalist production rests on their adequacy and correspondence to the capitalist mode of production. The exploitation of labor by capital not only harmonizes with the capitalist mode of production, but without it, capitalism would not even be possible. Consequently, capitalist exploitation is just.

Marx is quite explicit about this. In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, he replies to the Program's demand for 'a just distribution' with a series of rhetorical questions:

> What is a 'just distribution'?
>
> Do not the bourgeois assert that the present distribution is just? And isn't it in fact the only just distribution based on the present mode of production? Are economic relations ruled by juridical concepts (*Rechtsbegriffe*), or do not, on the contrary, juridical relations arise out of economic ones?[26]

I take it that the second and third questions are to be answered affirmatively. The bourgeois *do* assert that the present distribution is just, and it *is* in fact the only just distribution based on the present mode of production. Lest we think that the justice or injustice of a system of distribution might be judged on some other basis, the implied answer to the fourth rhetorical question reminds us that juridical concepts do *not* rule economic relations, but, on the contrary, juridical relations (the actual justice or injustice of transactions between agents of production) *do* arise out of economic ones.

Adolph Wagner's interpretation of Marx elicits from him some even more emphatic statements:

> This obscurantist foists on me the view that 'surplus value,' which is produced by the workers alone, remains with the capitalist entrepreneurs in a *wrongful* manner (*ungebührlicher Weise*). But I say the direct opposite: namely, that at a certain point, the production of commodities necessarily becomes 'capitalistic' production of commodities, and that according to the *law of value* which rules that production, 'surplus value' is due (*gebührt*) to the capitalist and not to the workers.[27]

> In my presentation, the earnings of capital are not in fact [as Wagner alleges] 'only a deduction or 'robbery' of the worker.' On the contrary, I present the capitalist as a necessary functionary of capitalist production, and show at length that he does not only 'deduct' or 'rob' but forces the production of surplus value, and thus helps create what is to be deducted; further I show in detail that even if in commodity exchange *only equivalents* are exchanged, the capitalist – as soon as he pays the worker the actual value of his labor power – earns *surplus value* with full right, i.e. the right corresponding to this mode of production.[28]

In reading these passages, there still may be a temptation to think that Marx does not mean to say that capitalist exploitation is really just, but only that it is commonly considered just, or that it is just only by (false) bourgeois standards. But to think this is to make the assumption that there might be standards of justice which are 'truer' than those dictated by adequacy or correspondence to the prevailing mode of production, or another (and better) basis for calling practices just or unjust than the one provided by their actual economic function. Marx's concept of justice involves the rejection of precisely these assumptions.

The Wagner notes also lay to rest the idea that Marx must believe capitalist exploitation is wrongful or unjust because (in language reminiscent of the early Proudhon) he describes it as 'robbery' and 'theft'. For in the above passage Marx agrees that his theory says capital robs the worker, but nevertheless insists (in the very same sentence) that the capitalist 'earns surplus value with full right'. Plainly the sort of 'robbery' involved in capital's exploitation of labor is not one which Marx sees as constituting a wrong or injustice to the workers. What sort of robbery is this? In a number of places, Marx indicates that the

capitalist class stands to the proletariat in a relation somewhat analogous to that of a conquering people to a less organized and less well-armed (but more productive) population which it regularly plunders or from which (in lieu of this) it exacts tribute.[29] If this is the analogy, then it is not so clear that robbery has to be unjust, given Marx's concept of justice. For Marx, the relation between plunderers or conquerors and their victims or tributaries is not something economically accidental, but must constitute a regular production relation as determined by the stage of development of the victims' productive powers.[30] Hence there is good reason to think that the transactions (ranging from military incursions to tax collection) between plunderers and plundered correspond to the prevailing mode of production, and are just according to Marx's concept of justice. Likewise, there is good reason to think that when capitalists plunder their workers in an analogous fashion, they are acting fully within their rights, as the Wagner notes say they are.

In Chapter 16 we will consider whether an essential feature of all economic exploitation is coercion. In capitalist exploitation, Marx thinks coercion is often masked by the *fictio juris* of a voluntary contract between capitalist and worker. This is the point of Marx's frequent insinuations that capital not only robs but also cheats or defrauds the workers. Yet Marx never infers from this that capital does the workers an injustice, and there is no reason why he must draw such an inference. Very few people would hold that all coercion as such is unjust, and there is no sign that Marx holds this. Marx does mean to attack the illusions built into capitalist production, and in particular its illusion that wage laborers are freer than slaves, serfs or other oppressed classes. One of the reasons why Marx attacks the juridical conception of the capital–labor relation is that it is a prominent vehicle for this illusion. But the illusion here is not in the belief that the transactions between capital and labor are just (this belief is quite true). The illusion is in the false, moralistic idea that this justice guarantees liberty to the workers, or protects them from exploitation, or gives them any reason to be content with their lot.

Another temptation may be to suppose that Marx might condemn capitalist exploitation as unjust by applying standards which would be appropriate to some postcapitalist mode of production. No doubt capitalism could be condemned in this way, but since Marx holds that such standards would not be applicable to capitalism, there is no reason to think he would agree with the resulting moral judgments. 'Right can never be higher than the economic formation of society

and the cultural development conditioned by it.'[31] Marx does believe that a communist revolution will introduce a new mode of production, and with it new standards of right and justice – or rather a succession of such standards, as postcapitalist society itself develops. If Marx speaks of these standards as 'higher' than those of bourgeois society, he does not mean that they approach more closely to some timeless moral ideal, but only that they belong to a society which as a whole is higher as measured by its productive powers and the nonmoral goods they furnish to people. New moral or juridical standards do not create a new mode of production, they only express and support it, just as the old standards did for the old society. A higher mode of production is not 'more just' than a lower one; it is only just in its own way.

Engels does of course speak of the 'proletarian morality of the future' and its competition with the 'Christian feudal' and 'modern bourgeois' moralities. He interprets competing moral codes as class ideologies, 'either justifying the domination and the interests of the ruling class or else, as soon as the oppressed class becomes strong enough, representing the indignation against this dominion and the future interests of the oppressed'. He even says that there has been 'progress in morality largely and on the whole, as in all other branches of human knowledge'.[32] These remarks might lead us to expect that Marx and Engels would envision 'proletarian' standards of justice whose imposition on capitalist society would give expression to the proletarians' indignation against their condition and serve to promote their class interests. Engels, however, explicitly denies that the 'proletarian morality of the future' is 'true' as contrasted with its feudal and bourgeois predecessors. And neither Marx nor Engels ever employs the standards of 'future' or 'proletarian' morality to condemn the present social order.

But why not? The reason, I believe, is this: The fact that capitalism is just (by the standards appropriate to capitalist production) provides no real defense of capitalist society. Likewise, the fact that it could be condemned as unjust by applying some foreign standard constitutes no valid criticism of capitalist relations. The rational content of proletarian moral ideologies consists in the real proletarian interests represented by these ideologies, and the nonmoral goods which will come about as a result of the victory of these interests in the historical struggle. Marx prefers to criticize capitalism directly in terms of this rational content, and sees no point in presenting his criticisms in the mystified form they would assume in a moral ideology.

Marx does not hold that an idea is correct just in case it is a proletarian idea. If Marx had condemned capitalism by measuring it against 'proletarian' standards of justice, then it would still be pertinent to inquire after the rational foundation of those standards, and the grounds for regarding them as applicable to capitalism. These questions are not settled for Marx merely by calling the standards 'proletarian', or even by showing that their dissemination or satisfaction serves proletarian interests. For Marx, standards of justice based on correspondence to the prevailing mode of production can be given some sort of rational foundation. Alternative 'proletarian' standards could not. The most that could be said for them is that people whose heads are stuffed with such ideological fluff would be easier converts to the proletarian cause. But one of the chief aims of that cause, as Marx pictures it, is to enable people to disenthrall themselves of ideological illusions, to cast off the need for them. To create a 'proletarian morality' or 'proletarian concept of justice' by disseminating a set of ideas which working class agitators find politically advantageous would strike Marx as a shortsighted and self-defeating course for the movement to adopt. It is far safer and more efficacious in the long run to rely simply on the genuine (i.e., nonmoral) reasons people have for wanting an obsolete and inhuman social system to be overthrown and replaced by a higher one.[33]

10

MORALITY AS IDEOLOGY

1 The social function of morality

Given Marx's concept of justice, it is obvious that for him the question whether capitalist exploitation should be abolished or not does not turn on whether it is just or unjust. Instead, it turns on whether capitalist social relations correspond to the existing stage of society's productive powers and whether they are conducive to the further development of these powers. If (as Marx believes) capitalism is fast becoming obsolete, and has already become a fetter on human development, then the more swiftly and painlessly capitalism is done away with, the better it will be for humanity. The laws and moral precepts which arise out of the existing order, however, are charged with the function of protecting that order; they will probably forbid some of the steps necessary to overthrow it. Once we recognize that moral defenses of capitalism have this material basis, these defenses will no longer have the power to mystify us. We will be like those proletarians to whom, according to Marx, 'laws, morality, religion are only so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which hide just as many bourgeois interests.'[1]

For Marx, in revolutionary situations, morality is more an obstacle to human progress than one of its weapons. Against Proudhon, he insists that in history 'it is always the bad side which finally triumphs over the good side. For the bad side is the one which brings movement to life, which makes history by bringing the struggle to fruition.'[2] At this point, as Engels makes quite explicit, Marx is following Hegel, for whom 'evil is the form in which the driving force of historical development presents itself. . . . Each new progress necessarily steps forward as a crime against something holy, as rebellion against conditions which are old, dying, yet hallowed by custom.'[3]

Engels' interpretation of Hegel is correct. Hegel sees morality as

basically a conservative social force, an aspect of human culture which periodically must be violated and overthrown by the movement of history to make way for what is novel, higher and more rational. The essential function of morality for Hegel is to preserve a spirit, a culture, a people, a way of life. When history has rendered a form of spirit obsolete, it must destroy this form to make way for a higher one:

> Here is just where there arise the great collisions of subsisting, recognized duties, laws and rights with those possibilities which are opposed to this system, which violate it, and even destroy its foundations and actuality. . . . These possibilities now become history; they include a universal of another species than the universal which constitutes the basis of the people's or state's subsistence.[4]

The world-historical possibilities, in Hegel's view, are seized upon by 'world-historical individuals', by extraordinary and ambitious men such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte, who 'grasp the higher universal, make it their own purpose and realize this purpose in accordance with the higher law of the spirit'. The effectiveness of these individuals as vehicles of historical reason consists largely in the fact that they are driven by powerful 'passions' which 'respect none of the limitations which law and morality would impose on them', and consequently are not deterred by the powerful conservative forces which try to block the progressive movement of the world spirit.[5] As Engels says (again expounding Hegel): 'it is precisely the bad passions of men, greed and love of dominion, which have become the levers of historical development.'[6]

Of course Marx does not view 'reason' or 'spirit' or 'history' as historical agents, and he does not think that individual 'great men' are the prime movers of history. But he does agree with Hegel in viewing human history as consisting of a series of epochs, with each one succeeding the next through a tumultuous period of transition in which society is shaken to its very foundations. And he does think that moral standards, as they are actually recognized and lived, are generally on the conservative side in such historical struggles. A rising social class for Marx is of course not driven by 'passion' but by its class interests. Yet these interests (like the ambitions of Hegel's great men) are fundamentally aspirations to nonmoral goods, which are able to effect fundamental social changes precisely because they are

opposed to and more powerful than the moral and legal superstructures of the old social order.

The *Communist Manifesto* emphasizes this 'immoralist' aspect of the bourgeois revolution when it points out how the bourgeoisie has abolished the 'political and religious illusions of feudalism', and 'drowned the holy fervor of pious enthusiasm, of chivalrous inspiration, of philistine sentimentality, in the icy water of egoistical calculation'.[7] Marx exhibits the same attitude in behalf of the revolutionary proletariat when he asserts that the movement will not be deterred by 'bourgeois prejudices, hiding bourgeois interests', and condemns those who would base the proletariat's conception of its historical aims on 'ideological shuffles' and 'outdated verbal trivia' such as the notions of 'just distribution' and 'equal right'.[8] For Marx, the socially effective norms of right and justice (if correctly understood in their actual social function) are largely weapons of the oppressing class. Far from being carried out in their name, the proletarian revolution can only succeed through 'despotic encroachments on property rights'.[9]

Marx regards moral consciousness generally as ideological, and moralists in general as ideologists. Granted Marx's views, morality may be described as 'ideology' in all three of the senses we distinguished in Chapter 7. Engels decries the concern with achieving 'social justice' in post capitalist society as 'idealistic'.[10] I think Marx and Engels regard social criticism based on moral norms as a form of 'historical idealism'. That is, they regard the moralistic approach to social criticism as predicated on the belief that the faithful adherence by individuals to the correct moral precepts is the proper way to effect progressive social change and to remove social oppression, whatever the state of society's productive forces or economic relations. It is not evident that social critics are necessarily committed to this belief when they base their criticism on 'justice' or other moral ideals, but it is undeniable that the belief is commonly held (often tacitly and uncritically) by people who do adopt a moralistic approach to social issues. And the belief is clearly inconsistent with some of the main tenets of historical materialism.

Marx also holds that moral ideas, beliefs and sentiments are functional ideologies. As we have seen, he holds that the content of recognized moral norms can be explained by the way in which they sanction existing social relations. Even where moral consciousness turns revolutionary, its content is determined by the class interests it sanctifies. And finally, moral consciousness is typically ideological illusion, in that people are normally unaware of the social function

fulfilled by the moral convictions they hold, and ignorant of the real basis of the highminded sentiments which motivate them. As a consequence of this ignorance, moral consciousness often involves illusions: ignorant of the real basis of their moral duties and impulses, people are easy prey for philosophical or religious ideas which represent these duties and impulses as having some holier or more rational basis than transient social forms and class interests.

Marx's critique of moral consciousness at this point clearly involves some assumptions which historical materialism by itself can never fully justify, no matter how successful it may be empirically. Perhaps historical materialism can show that Christian, Kantian or utilitarian moral theories have social functions of which their proponents are unaware, and that it is these social functions rather than the philosophical proofs offered in their favor which explain their wide social appeal. But historical materialism cannot (all by itself) show that recognized moral duties are *not* commanded by God or pure reason, or enjoined by some principle built into our nature as pleasure-loving, pain-avoiding and naturally sociable beings. Nor can it show that there is not some quality of overriding disinterested goodness which attaches to just and virtuous actions, even when these actions can be shown systematically to contribute to a social system based on class oppression. By itself, historical materialism can at most confound the moralists, by showing them that their disinterested moral good is in the end historically impotent because it is always finally at odds with the long term nonmoral interests of human development which govern the basic tendencies of history.

The German Ideology claims that historical materialism has 'broken the staff of all morality'; the *Communist Manifesto* declares that in view of the fact that people's ideas are products of their material conditions, 'the charges raised against communism from a religious, philosophical and in general from an ideological standpoint deserve no detailed examination.'[11] In these passages, Marx and Engels may be expressing the mistaken belief that historical materialism alone suffices to justify their contemptuous rejection of a long and broad tradition of moral thinking. But their attitude, while it may be rendered much more plausible by a materialist account of the social function of morality, also requires some *philosophical* defense. Marx may owe some argument (which he never really gives) to those who believe that standards of right and justice have a broader scope or stronger rational basis than his materialist theory allows for. Certainly a defense of his view requires that some sort of reply be made to those

philosophers who have pretended to supply such a basis. But Marx is probably right in thinking that if he can explain the content of morality materialistically in terms of its social function, then this raises deep and troubling questions for moralists, and suggests that a radical reassessment of moral values and moral consciousness is in order.

2 Marxism and utilitarianism

The claim is often made that the moral basis of Marxism is some form of utilitarianism. While I disagree with this claim, I think it is true that Marx's thoughts about morality have more in common with utilitarianism than with any other familiar position in moral philosophy. These thoughts can be illuminated by exploring their differences with utilitarianism.

Marx's explicit statements about utilitarianism do not give us much to work with. They express contemptuous rejection of the doctrine, but give little evidence that Marx understands what he is rejecting. *The German Ideology*'s attacks on Stirner's utilitarianism, which include criticisms of the French and British tradition behind it, rely heavily on Hegel's criticisms of the 'standpoint of utility' in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. They attack only caricatures of utilitarian thinking, and betray some fairly elementary misunderstandings of what utilitarianism (at least in such philosophers as Bentham, Mill, Austin, and Sidgwick) is all about.[12] Marx's well-known comments in *Capital* about Bentham ('that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois understanding') and his principle of utility ('at no time and in no land has a homespun commonplace ever swaggered so complacently') are abusive enough, but on closer inspection they exhibit even less substantive disagreement with Bentham's principle than comprehension of it.[13]

Utilitarianism holds that what is fundamentally desirable is the nonmoral good of all human (perhaps all sentient) beings, and that the moral good is determined by what is conducive to maximizing this nonmoral good. The determination of the moral good by the nonmoral can be conceived of in a variety of ways (directly in terms of particular acts, or via rules, moral codes or the imposition of sanctions), and this variety marks off the main forms utilitarianism takes. Most utilitarians (especially early in the doctrine's history) have held a hedonistic theory of the nonmoral good, though some have not. All utilitarians, however, hold that the nonmoral good is measurable and summable, so that at least in principle it makes sense to compare acts

or policies on the basis of a precise measurement of the total nonmoral good which will result from them.

Marx and utilitarians agree in according supreme value to the nonmoral good of human beings, and in denying that this good can be overridden by moral considerations allegedly having a higher claim on us than this good. I think these points of agreement constitute the principal element of truth in the claim that Marx is a utilitarian. But there are further affinities as well. Like utilitarians, Marx views morality as a device for securing the compliance of individuals with social requirements. Marx's account of what is right or just as what corresponds to the needs of the existing mode of production has some resemblance to the utilitarian account of morality as laying down the conditions for maximizing human welfare.

But Marx is not a utilitarian. There is no sign at all that Marx's conception of the nonmoral good is hedonistic. Further, Marx appears disinclined to regard the nonmoral good as quantitatively measurable and summable in the ways required by utilitarian theories. I think this is part of what *The German Ideology* means to express when it criticizes utilitarians for 'merging all relations in' or 'reducing all relations to' the 'abstract category of utility'.[14] Of course, if Marx were asked whether he would prefer a society with *more* of what he considers nonmorally good (self-actualization, prosperity, community, freedom) to one with *less*, I suppose he would answer affirmatively. He even says in one passage that 'in future society the time of production devoted to different objects will be determined by their degree of social utility.'[15] In *Capital*, however, Marx peremptorily dismisses the use-value of commodities as a basis for their exchange value on the ground that the utility of different commodities cannot be quantitatively compared at all: 'As use-values, commodities are before everything of different quality, while as exchange values they can only be of different quantities.'[16] As the *Critique* makes clear, Marx regards different use-values as comparable quantitatively only relative to others which are qualitatively the same, and can be measured against them in terms of gross physical quantities, such as length or weight or volume: 'Different use-values possess different measures according to their physical properties: a bushel of wheat, a quire of paper, an ell of linen.'[17] To utilitarians, these remarks will no doubt seem philosophically naïve. But I think they are conclusive evidence of Marx's disinclination to treat utility in a utilitarian way.

Marx's deepest disagreements with utilitarianism, however, have to do not with his conception of nonmoral goods, but with his

conception of morality. Marx regards moral norms (for instance, right and justice) as determined by correspondence to the prevailing mode of production, and not by what is conducive to the greatest nonmoral good. Given Marx's theory of social change, this leads to systematic divergences between his account of what morality demands and a utilitarian account, especially during periods of social revolution.

According to Marx, the primary function of moral standards is to sanction existing production relations which, during periods of social stability, constitute the social conditions under which society's productive powers, at the existing stage of their development, can be most efficiently employed and developed further. It might be (though it is not self-evident) that during such periods, morality does prescribe conditions under which the total welfare of humanity will be maximized. Even supposing this is so, in societies based on class oppression, morality would prescribe the conditions for the systematic subordination of the welfare of the oppressed to that of the oppressors. Utilitarianism conceals this fact by considering only the aggregate good or 'general happiness', thus conspicuously exemplifying the tendency of moral ideologies to represent the interests of the ruling class as universal human interests, which even the oppressed have a stake in promoting. During periods of social revolution, when existing social relations have become fetters on human development, the dictates of morality on Marx's theory will systematically diverge from the path prescribed by the good of humanity as a whole; Marx's account of morality will flatly contradict the utilitarian one. Of course Marx and the utilitarian agree that in such situations the nonmoral good of humanity is preferable to the dictates of morality (conceived in the Marxian fashion as correspondence to the prevailing mode of production). But they differ in that Marx regards these dictates as *morally valid*, whereas the utilitarian is committed to denying this.

I am sure that to many Marx's position here will appear perverse. Utilitarians will doubtless argue that when a mode of production has become obsolete (for the utilitarian: has ceased to promote the general happiness of humanity) then the moral code which sanctions it has also ceased to be valid, and a new moral code (perhaps one appropriate to the next form of society and serving the interests of the oppressed classes) should be regarded as the binding one. Most utilitarians (like Mill) will admit, or rather earnestly maintain, that people still have much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness. They agree with Marx that the received codes of morality are not of divine right. The force of their utilitarianism is only that

moral standards conducive to the greatest happiness *should* prevail, whether they have done so up to now or not.

At this point utilitarianism betrays its commitment to some definite assumptions which are distinctly at odds with Marx's historical materialism. First, utilitarians generally assume that the social function of morality is and always has been to promote the general happiness, and that its failure to do so adequately in the past has always been due to the unfortunate effects of ignorance and superstition. (Utilitarians are nearly always inclined to beat a cowardly retreat to the conservative assumption that received morality is utilitarian whenever opponents threaten them with morally repugnant consequences which appear to follow from utilitarianism.) But second, even in their more reformist moods, utilitarians betray their espousal of views which Marx would condemn as 'ideological' or 'idealist'. When utilitarians tell us that moral standards conducive to the greatest happiness *should* prevail, the 'should' must not be construed morally. If it were, the utilitarians would be appealing to some (as yet unjustified) moral standard to ground the moral standards they claim to be giving a nonmoral foundation. But in that case, why do they have to mention morality at all? Why don't they say directly (with Marx) that social relations (including those to which the actually valid moral standards correspond) 'should' be revolutionized so as to promote people's nonmoral good? The main reason, I think, is that utilitarians still believe that the right way to bring about economic change is to reform the moral ideas people carry around in their heads. Marx holds, on the contrary, that both the prevailing moral ideologies and the moral or juridical relations which are valid for a given society arise out of the economic relations belonging to its mode of production. Changes in prevailing standards of right and justice do not cause social revolutions, but only accompany them.

This of course is not to deny that bringing about changes in the moral, legal and political superstructure of society is for Marx an important subordinate moment of revolutionary practice. As we saw earlier, superstructures have economic power, and on Marx's theory they exist because they serve the needs of the mode of production to which they correspond. An economic revolution therefore probably could not take place without a revolution in the political and ideological sphere. But on Marx's theory, new standards of right and justice come to be valid *because* revolutionary changes occur in economic relations. It is *not* the case that revolutions do occur or should

occur because postrevolutionary moral standards are already valid for prerevolutionary society.

Marx's point is that morality is not a blank tablet on which we can write whatever commandments seem best to us. Morality, like every other artifact of human history, is made by people under definite conditions and presuppositions. To command, require or forbid a certain act *morally* is to command, require or forbid it in a determinate way, to say something about it with a definite social meaning. It is not an analytic proposition or trivial truth to say that the just, the virtuous or the morally right thing is the thing which, all things considered, should be done. For Marx, in fact, it is sometimes a pernicious falsehood. Marxism explicitly parts company with all views which hold that moral standards (such as right and justice) constitute 'the fundamental principle of all society', 'the standard by which to measure all things human', 'the final judge to be appealed to in all conflicts'.[18]

The very existence of moral concepts (right, justice, duty, virtue) and sentiments (the love of virtue, the motive of duty, the sense of justice) is on Marx's materialist theory to be explained by the social functions they perform. More specifically, the theory proposes to explain the specific content of moral norms by their correspondence to the prevailing mode of production. For Marx, what is right and just simply *is* what performs this function at this time, whether or not the valid norms of right and justice happen just then to serve the long run interests of humanity, and even if these interests require us to disregard and violate these norms. To suppose, as utilitarians do, that a moral norm or moral code is actually valid wherever its adoption would promote the greatest nonmoral good is (on Marx's social theory) to entertain a false and fantastic conception of the actual role morality plays in human society. And since on Marx's theory the nature of any social factor is determined by its social function, this is to entertain a false and fantastic conception of what morality *is*.

3 Is Marx an immoralist?

So far, I have been emphasizing the 'amoralist', even 'immoralist' side of Marx. I believe the best way to account for Marx's explicit statements about right and justice, as well as a number of other things he says about morality, is to suppose that he observes a distinction between moral and nonmoral values, and that (following Hegel)

he views moral values as normally on the conservative side in revolutionary situations.

Marx's view of morality may also be fruitfully compared with Nietzsche's. Marx and Nietzsche both approach morality by attempting to identify the role it actually plays in human life, and to evaluate moral values themselves according to the way they promote or impede the development of humanity's nonmoral potentialities. In Nietzsche's case, the nonmoral values in question include such things as strength, creativity and abundant life. Nietzsche attacks morality's basic conceptions and everything that has so far been esteemed in its name insofar as he thinks morality has proven detrimental to (even hostile to) these nonmoral goods. Like Nietzsche, Marx is a critic of morality. He too rejects morality insofar as it represents blind submission to entrenched customs and stands in the way of human development by protecting outmoded social structures.[19]

Some of Nietzsche's harshest criticisms of morality are directed toward the way in which he believes it expresses and encourages illusions and self-deception about the meaning of people's feelings and actions. Marx's theory does not necessarily ascribe unconscious psychological motives to people, or self-deception about their motives. But it does hold that moral ideologies typically perform their social function by hiding that function from people, providing a religious, metaphysical or bogus humanitarian rationale for observing morality's commands. These ideologies falsely represent the interests of one social class as universal human interests, or what serves the interests of a class as something disinterestedly good. And they typically encourage false, idealistic beliefs about what progressive social change consists in, and how it can best be achieved. Insofar as morality does these things, Marx believes that it is one of the chief tasks of historical materialism and the working class movement to undermine moral consciousness, along with other mystifying ideologies.

But Marx's 'immoralism' cannot be the whole story. For whatever his social theory may say about morality, Marx is far from avoiding moral judgments about particular individuals and about commonly held social attitudes. His writings seethe with moral indignation, apparently directed against the bourgeoisie and its apologists. It is not difficult to find him attacking bourgeois governments or his political foes for cruetly, unscrupulousness or dishonesty, and defending the honor of the individuals and movements of which he approves. Like most everyone else, Marx morally condemns stock-market swindling, mendacity and venality in politicians, and disloyalty or opportunism

in his fellow radicals. He is not even above being scandalized by Ferdinand Lassalle's liaison with the Countess von Hatzfeldt.[20]

How are we to square the apparent 'immoralism' of Marx's social theory with the otherwise humdrum fact that Marx moralizes like the rest of us? One possibility, of course, is that my interpretation of Marx on morality is mistaken. But to adopt this solution, I submit, would require us to ignore or give a tortured interpretation to nearly everything Marx says explicitly about the nature of morality, the content of moral norms and the relation of moral consciousness to historical materialism.

Another option, more viable in my opinion, would be to say that Marx's views are simply incoherent: more precisely, that Marx's common sense moral judgments are undermined by the things he says about morality from a theoretical standpoint. Marx's theoretical reflections on morality are not extensive or well-developed in his writings. It is not unthinkable that even so acute a mind as his might not have realized that if these reflections were carried through consistently they could not be reconciled with the common-sense moral consciousness Marx takes for granted most of the time. If we decide to adopt this solution, it might justify us in dismissing the account of morality I have drawn from Marx's texts as a line of thinking too little developed by Marx himself to be counted as part of his genuine doctrine at all. To do this, however, would commit us to abandoning altogether the quest for Marx's moral views, or for the 'moral foundations' of his critique of capitalism. For it would be in effect to admit that Marx has no views about morality at all, that what he says on the subject amounts to nothing coherent enough to be called a definite doctrine.

But I doubt that we are forced to any such conclusions. For I doubt that there is any obvious incoherence between Marx's everyday moral judgments and his theoretical pronouncements about morality. Marx consistently refuses to attack capitalist social relations themselves as unjust or morally wrong in any way. These relations, which are always his primary target, are consistently attacked on exclusively nonmoral grounds, for the nonmoral evils (poverty, alienation, unfreedom) they impose on the workers. Undoubtedly the 'oppression', 'exploitation' and even 'robbery' inherent in capitalist relations are prominent objects of Marx's attacks. But there is no sign that Marx sees anything morally wrong or unjust about these features of capitalism; that they are wrong or unjust is precisely that Marx consistently denies. I think we find no contradiction or incoherence in

Marx if we proceed on the assumption that he attacks social oppression and exploitation simply because he regards them as nonmoral evils or as the cause of nonmoral evils.

But what of the unmistakably moral tone which pervades Marx's writings? The *Communist Manifesto* openly professes that the communists 'never cease for a moment to educe from the workers the clearest possible consciousness of the hostile opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat'.[21] At least part of this hostility, as Marx expresses it, seems to consist in moral indignation and blame, apparently directed against the bourgeoisie, and against those who share bourgeois attitudes. But what can be the target of this blame if not the oppressors, and how can Marx treat oppressors as blameworthy if he finds nothing wrong or unjust in what they do?

Marx, however, explicitly disavows the intention to condemn individual bourgeois morality for the social fact of class oppression. Not only does he deny that they are guilty of injustices, but he also explicitly denies that they are morally responsible for the exploitation from which they benefit. In the Preface to *Capital*, Marx says:

> In order to prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. By no means do I paint the forms of capitalist and landowner in a rosy light. But here it is a question of persons only insofar as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of determinate class-relations and class-interests. Less than any other can my standpoint, which grasps the development of economic social formations as a process of natural history, hold individuals responsible for the relations whose creatures they remain socially, however much they may rise above them subjectively.[22]

Here Marx denies that individual capitalists and landlords are to blame for the exploitation from which they benefit, because they as individuals do not create exploitative social relations but only live out the role in which these relations cast them. But the passage must be read carefully. For Marx is *not* saying that the exploiters are blameless because they 'know not what they do' (on the contrary, he explicitly excludes from blame those who 'subjectively rise above' their class position, who understand the terrible consequences of the social relations in which they are involved). Nor, I think, is Marx saying that the exploiters have no choice because their actions are all causally determined (as by economic facts). His point, I think, is that under

capitalism the individual exploiters should not be blamed because the economic system gives them no viable option but to exploit. If an individual capitalist, in order to avoid being an exploiter, should withdraw his capital from production (a choice which, as far as I can see, Marx does not deny he is free to make) the result would be only that he would lose the profit on his capital, and the social power he refused to exercise would be wielded by someone less high-principled (and less ineffectual). Marx never urges capitalists to practice such 'voluntary poverty' or tries to make them feel guilty for playing the economic role in which the system casts them. Certainly Marx never urged Engels to give up his textile mills in Manchester or prodded his conscience about them. Some writers have professed to find something hypocritical in the fact that Marx and Engels condemn capitalist exploitation while Engels (and Marx too, for many years) live off its fruits. Perhaps the behavior of Marx and Engels does violate moral principles held by these writers; but there is no evidence that it violates principles held by Marx and Engels themselves.

Marx has nothing but praise for those who, whatever their source of income, see the evils of capitalism and devote their time, energy and resources to its revolutionary overthrow. I suggest that he does not blame exploiters as such, but only those exploiters whose class interests blind them to the inhumanity of the system, people who remain callous and complacent in the face of the needless misery and alienation it causes. I think we can account for the tone of Marx's writings quite well if we suppose that his indignation is directed primarily against those 'oxen', who 'turn their backs on the torments of humanity and care only for their own hides'.[23] Callousness in the face of suffering may be morally evil even if suffering is a nonmoral evil. Marx falls into no inconsistency if he morally condemns an attitude of complacency in the face of massive and remediable nonmoral evil, while refusing to condemn morally the nonmoral evil itself.

4 Why should a Marxist be moral?

Perhaps what worries us, however, is not the threat that Marx's theoretical pronouncements about morality directly conflict with the specific moral judgments he makes. Instead, the suspicion may be that Marx's theory undermines morality in general, leaving Marx with no basis on which to be indignant over callousness, dishonesty, opportunism (or anything else) without succumbing to what he himself attacks as ideological nonsense.

But it will take some argument to show that this suspicion is well-founded. Marx holds that the rational basis for our moral beliefs and attitudes, insofar as there is one, consists in the way in which these beliefs and attitudes serve the prevailing mode of production or promote the interests of a certain social class. Once we see how they do this, we may very well find parts of morality dispensable or even objectionable. But it requries further argument to show that the destructive impact of materialist self-awareness on our moral consciousness must be radical and wholesale, rather than limited and selective.

One such argument might be drawn from the Marxian claim that all morality is class morality, and the Marxian view that valid moral standards (e.g., of right and justice) consist in what corresponds to the prevailing mode of production. These ideas might be taken to imply that all valid moral standards in capitalist society promote bourgeois class interests and serve to protect what Marx regards as an inhuman system. Marx himself says that in bourgeois society morality is only 'bourgeois prejudice' masking 'bourgeois interests'. There is no reason for a proletarian, or indeed anyone else clearsighted enough to see capitalism as Marx sees it, to promote bourgeois interests or contribute to the stability of capitalist society. Therefore, such an individual has no reason at all to respect valid moral standards. They should appear as objectionable to him as capitalism itself.

This argument is sophistical. When Marx says that all morality is class morality and that justice consists in correspondence to the prevailing mode of production, he means that the effect of moral standards as a whole is to protect prevailing social relations and that certain distinctive features of prevalent moral ideas (e.g., the glorification of self-reliant individuality in bourgeois morals, or their emphasis on the sanctity of private property) can be explained by the way they promote class interests. But it does not follow from any of this that each and every element of bourgeois morality counts as distinctively bourgeois, considered in isolation from the whole, or that the moral precepts preached in bourgeois society always promote bourgeois interests whenever they are followed. Bourgeois morality, for instance, also teaches virtues such as kindness, generosity, loyalty and fidelity to promises. But there is no reason to think that these teachings in their bare, bloodless generality are peculiar to bourgeois society or necessarily serve bourgeois interests. They become specifically bourgeois only when united with other ideas and practices (for instance, when 'generosity' comes to mean socially inefficacious

'private charity' in place of genuine, revolutionary remedies for systematic poverty in society, or when 'loyalty' comes to mean devotion to the bourgeois state or to the 'free enterprise system'). Marx obviously expects proletarians to practice generosity and loyalty among themselves, and realizes that without these moral virtues the movement will neither succeed nor be deserving of anyone's support.

Of Michael Bakunin, Engels remarks: 'It is one of his chief principles that keeping promises and things of that kind are merely bourgeois prejudices, which the true revolutionary must always treat with contempt in the interest of the cause.'[24] Engels obviously does not endorse Bakunin's (alleged) principle. There is nothing in Marxian theory which should incline him to do so.

When the *Communist Manifesto* says that to the proletarians, morality is only bourgeois prejudices masking bourgeois interests, we should not interpret this as saying any more than that proletarians should view in this light all moral appeals which would require or encourage them to sacrifice their class interests to those of the bourgeoisie, or place moral scruples in the way of over-throwing the capitalist system. Marx is not so desperately stupid as to regard every act of immorality or lawlessness as a blow against oppression, and he has only contempt for mindless terrorists who view their actions in this way.[25] He is always inclined to regard proletarian crime and immorality, like bourgeois crime and immorality, as a distasteful symptom of capitalism's decadence rather than as anything to be approved of. There is no reason why Marx should condone the violation of even so bourgeois a moral precept as respect for private property unless it serves some genuine purpose in the class struggle.

For Marx, morality is based on what societies require in order to function under the specific historical conditions where they are found. The fact that societies exist, and that moralities contribute to their success in the way they do, is clear evidence that people have a natural capacity to fulfill these requirements and a natural susceptibility to the demands morality makes on them, even where these demands run contrary to their personal whims or self-interest. For obvious reasons, Marx stresses the way in which morality in class society involves false consciousness and often commands people to act contrary to their real class interests. But Marx does not question the rationality of the basic human tendency on which the appeal of morality is founded: the tendency of people to fulfill the demands imposed on them by social life.

Of course this is not to say that Marx has any distinctive answer to

the philosopher's question: 'Why be moral?' Marx does not even appear to hold that the moral thing always is the thing to do, so we should not expect a general answer from him in any case. But we might suppose that the question would be more difficult for him than for most philosophers, since his views pretty clearly involve a repudiation of some standard theological and metaphysical answers to it. Yet I see no reason why the question 'Why be moral?' should trouble a Marxist any more than it does most others who hold that the foundations of morality are made of mortal clay rather than of some celestial or transcendental stuff. Marx's views ascribe to people a natural tendency to fulfill the substance of morality, that is, to satisfy the demands of social life corresponding to the stage of development of their productive powers. Although in class society the fulfillment of these demands may often depend on illusions, there is no reason to think that all acts of loyalty, honesty, generosity or self-sacrifice must depend on them. In particular, the fact that these acts may sometimes go against our self-interest creates no problem. Recall that for Marx egoistic actions are no more inherently natural or rational than altruistic or socially directed actions. The fact that the actions morality approves are sometimes not in the agent's own interest does not by itself show that there is any special problem about the rationality of these actions.

Marx sees historical materialism as 'breaking the staff of all morality' by showing people the real reason why moral ideologies appeal to them. In this way, it enables them to escape false or mystifying ideas which have held them captive. Because this new freedom gives them the power to reassess the rationality of morals, it is only to be expected that it will involve some changes in people's attitudes, less blind acceptance of what traditional morality dictates, and less susceptibility to fantastic motives and sentiments dreamed up by ideologues. In this sense, Marx must see a future society free of ideology as one which 'does away with morality instead of forming it anew'. But because the economic basis of morality is in itself fundamentally rational, there is reason to think that to a considerable extent the consequences of understanding morality materialistically will be that people will do 'consciously' and 'humanly' the same things they did before without understanding the real reasons for them. Hence there is also some reason to say (as Engels does) that in future society there will be an 'actual human morality' in place of the false, ideological moralities of class society.[26]

5 Marx's attitude toward morality, and our attitude

Marx does not condemn capitalism on grounds of justice or on any other moral grounds. He rejects the position of those who do because he thinks it rests on false and mystified ideas about morality that his materialist conception of history enables us to expose as false and ideological. In effect, Marx proposes a highly reductive and deflationary conception of moral values and principles, according to which moral conceptions and moral grounds would have little appeal to critics of social arrangements, at least to critics who are rational and clearsighted. Rational and clearsighted people would have no commitment to morality, just as they would have no commitment to religion, nationalistic patriotism or a host of other traditional values Marx thinks he has exposed as pernicious mystification in the service of social illusion and class oppression.

Marx's views about morality are radical. Despite the contemptuous polemics directed against Max Stirner by Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology*, Marx's views about morality were evidently influenced very strongly by Stirner's eccentric (some might even say *insane*) rejection of all morality in the name of the individual's fidelity to a standpoint that is authentically his own. Stirner's anti-moralism frequently flirts with incoherence, at times even seems willingly to embrace it. Throughout Part Three of this book, I have been arguing that Marx's rejection of morality, though radical and perhaps even hopelessly implausible, is not incoherent. It represents one cogent way of applying Marx's historical materialist theses to the critique of moral thinking and to moralistic conceptions such as social justice. I think we have a lot to learn from studying Marx's criticism of moral concepts and values, from seeing the connection between this criticism and Marxian historical materialism, and from appreciating the overall coherence of the resulting position.

It is a separate question, however, whether Marx's highly deflationary conception of morality is the only possible way of developing historical materialism. (Surely it is not.) It is also a separate question whether Marx's reductive and dismissive treatment of moral conceptions is a position that we should in the end find defensible for ourselves. I do not think that very many people – whether or not they are sympathetic with Marx's social theory and his views about capitalism – are likely to find his radical critique of morality credible or appealing if it is taken to be the whole truth. The materialist conception of history invites us to explain relations of right as superstructural on

economic relations of production, and prevailing conceptions of justice as features of social ideology. But by itself it does not imply that the justice of an economic transaction (for instance) is *nothing but* its correspondence to the prevailing mode of production. Most of us who think Marx is right in claiming that capital exploits labor and dehumanizes workers find it natural to react with *moral* indignation against a social system that does this, and we find it quite natural to express our indignation by saying that capitalism is a social system that is deeply *unjust*. Marx is obviously indignant about the same things we are, but there is no reason why he might not remain consistent with his own views by refusing to moralize the content of his anger. Yet if Marx's deflationary accounts of justice and morality seem incompatible with the moralistic form such a reaction takes in us, it is natural to reject these analyses as excessively reductive, failing to capture everything we mean by justice and other moral properties.

This is probably in the end the most reasonable reaction to Marx's views about morality. At any rate, it is my own reaction. If I have postponed expressing it in the preceding chapters, that is mainly because I am also impressed by the combination of radical novelty with overall coherence found in Marx's views about morality, and think it would be highly erroneous to dismiss them too quickly just because in the end we decide we cannot agree with them.

It would of course be a reason for interpreting Marx's objections to capitalism as moral objections, even against his own explicit statements that they are not, if we could not make coherent sense of his position without attributing to him criticisms of capitalism on moral grounds. But in this chapter I have been arguing that Marx's anti-moralism is a perfectly coherent and well-motivated view, even if we decide in the end that it is too radical to be accepted. In Chapter 16 we will look further at Marx's claim that capital exploits labor, and I will argue that although this claim might motivate moral criticisms of capitalism, it also makes sense on the assumption that Marx's criticisms of capitalism are not motivated by moral considerations.

The worst possible reason for interpreting away Marx's anti-moralism would be the thought that Marxism would become more defensible, or more popular, if his anti-moralistic remarks could somehow be set aside. Equally bad would be to subject Marx's texts to the exegetical constraint that they must be regarded as infallible, hence one must interpret them as asserting only what is supposed to count as true.

This last point has long been evident to any honest, rational person

who contemplates the principled mendacity involved in the way most religious people read their holy scriptures. Even if some text were in fact written by an infallible author, we could never justifiably claim to be so infallible ourselves as to know this to be so. Consequently, everything we read must be approached with the aim of distinguishing within what it says between what is true and what is false, as well as with the consciousness that our ability to do this is itself always fallible. To approach any text with the *a priori* assumption that whatever one understands it to be saying has to be something one also understands to be the truth – to do this is always to forfeit one's intellectual integrity from the start. It would be better to read nothing at all than to read anything that way.