

**MARX AS MORALIST AND ANTIMORALIST
NOTES FOR PHILOSOPHY 166**

FALL, 2007

Dick Arneson

1. The Problem. Marx is undeniably a fierce critic of a capitalist organization of economic activity. By what standards does Marx assess capitalism and find it objectionable? In many passages it seems that Marx's critique is based upon notions of justice and fairness which in his opinion capitalism flagrantly fails to satisfy. In the "Communist Manifesto," contrasting the phenomenon of exploitation as it occurs under feudalism with the capitalist version of the phenomenon, Marx writes, "In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it [the bourgeoisie] has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." Readers will naturally take Marx to be asserting that exploitation, whether hidden or open, is grievously morally objectionable. But then it must be noted that Marx sometimes explicitly disavows any criticism of capitalism on grounds of its immorality or injustice. In Critique of the Gotha Program Marx writes sneeringly,

What is a "fair distribution"?

Do not the bourgeois assert that the present-day distribution is "fair"? And is it not, in fact, the only "fair" distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production? Are economic relations regulated by legal conceptions or do not, on the contrary, legal relations arise from economic ones? Have not also the socialist sectarians the most varied notions about "fair" distribution? (Marx-Engels Reader, p. 528)

Here Marx seems to be saying that there is something suspicious or inherently confused in the very idea of a "fair distribution" as standardly employed in debate about the fundamental justice or injustice of economic systems. If this is so then the communist critic should not be claiming that under capitalism distribution is "unfair" but under communism distribution will be genuinely "fair". Marx accordingly vehemently objects to the proposal of the Gotha Program to include in the platform of a German working class political party the demand for a "fair distribution of the proceeds of labour." Later in the same essay Marx states that he is criticizing slogans of "equal right" and "fair distribution" "in order to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instil into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French Socialists" (Marx-Engels Reader, p. 531).

Together these passages pose a puzzle about how to understand what Marx is doing, or thinks he is doing, in undertaking to provide systematic social criticism of capitalist market economies. If moral criticism in terms of slogans of "equal right" and "fair distribution" is inappropriate, what then is the right sort of criticism? What exactly is supposed to be wrong with criticism couched in the language of morality and justice? How do we interpret Marx's objections against capitalist exploitation, since "exploitation" looks to be a morally charged term from the same family as "unfair" or "unjust" or "unequal"?

2. The Communist Manifesto, Part II. One good place to begin to explore these questions is section II of the "Communist Manifesto," where Marx invents a bourgeois moral critic of communism and works to rebut the objections against communism that he puts in the mouth of this imaginary moral critic. The critic objects (1) that communism would abolish the right of acquiring property in the fruits of one's own labor (p. 584), (2) that communism would take away the incentive of gaining privately from one's own hard work, and thus initiate a regime of universal laziness (p. 486), (3) that communism would abolish family life (p. 487) and turn all women into public property to be used sexually as men please (p. 488), (4) that communism would abolish "eternal truths" such as freedom and justice (p. 489), (5) that communism would undermine people's patriotic love of their own nation (p. 488), and so on.

The reader might expect that Marx would answer the critic by explaining the communist morality on each point in dispute and then arguing for the superiority of communist morality over its capitalist rival. By and large Marx does not do this. Marx instead pursues two strategies of argument. One strategy is to turn the tables on the opponent by assuming for the sake of argument that the value the critic posits is really valuable. But since this value is not achieved to any significant extent under capitalism, the alleged fact that the value would not be achieved to any significant extent under communism provides no reason whatsoever

to prefer capitalism to communism on this moral ground. In this vein Marx argues for example that the inexorable trend of capitalist market relations is to destroy family life, so the alleged fact that communism would be inhospitable to family life is no black mark against communism. Notice that this style of argument consistently practiced does not force Marx to reveal his own values on the topics under discussion. Marx's arguments to the extent they are successful blunt the polemical force of his critic's claims without committing Marx one way or another on the moral issues.

The second strategy of argument draws upon Marx's theory of history. Marx asserts that the critic is trying to apply to a new emerging form of society moral standards that make sense only in relation to the old society that is about to disappear. He writes:

But don't wrangle with us so long as you apply, to our intended abolition of bourgeois property, the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, &c. Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will, whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class (p. 487).

On p. 489 Marx adds that the objections against communism advanced by the critic "are not deserving of serious examination." He continues, "Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?"

Marx's theory of history holds that in a stable society the nature of society's relations of production (property relations) is explained by the fact that they are well-adapted to promoting the growth and use of the productive forces, and that the nature of society's political and legal culture is explained by the fact that it is well-adapted to preserving the dominant relations of production. So in a stable capitalist society, the commonly accepted morality will support and justify capitalist property. In exactly the same way, according to Marx, in a stable feudal society the dominant morality will support and justify feudal property (and repudiate free market economic activity). Each mode of production has a morality that corresponds to it. By feudal standards, capitalist activity is unjust, and by capitalist standards, feudal economic relations are unjust, but it would be silly and anachronistic to criticize capitalism by appeal to the moral standards of a by-gone era. Once capitalism becomes unstable and prone to crisis, its morals will begin to look less obviously true to ordinary common sense: this is just a symptom of social change. The communist movement developing within capitalism may begin to anticipate the norms of the new society that is coming to be, and for the critic to denounce this movement by appealing to the morality of the dying capitalist society is just to reveal lack of understanding of historical development.

Part of what Marx is saying here might be put as follows. The bourgeois critic assumes that there are moral truths valid at all times and places, so it makes sense to ask "What is just?" or "What is moral?" Marx maintains that such questions are not well-formed. Morality is always relative to a given society or mode of production. "What is just according to capitalist norms?" is a sensible question, the answer to which is different from the answer to the question "What is just according to feudal norms?" The two answers are different but they do not conflict, any more than the statement "Scotland lies to the north of England" conflicts with the statement, "Scotland lies to the south of Iceland." Both statements can be true together. But if moral truth is always relative to a given form of society, it is obvious that moral norms do not provide the appropriate terms of assessment for comparing transitions between one form of society and another. On this view, morality is not a useful tool for the task of fundamental social criticism. The fact that capitalist exploitation is perfectly fair according to the norms of capitalism (as Marx asserts in Critique of the Gotha Program) does not in any way recommend capitalism or give one any reason to support this social system when it is challenged in the process of historical change.

The question then arises, what terms of assessment are appropriate for doing fundamental social criticism? If Marx dismisses criticism rooted in moral standards, what sort of standards does Marx appeal to in criticizing capitalism? One suggestion is that Marx repudiates criticism based on moral values but relies on criticism based on nonmoral values. "There is nothing problematic about saying that disguised exploitation, unnecessary servitude, economic instability, and declining productivity are features of a productive system which constitute good reasons for condemning it," writes Allen Wood, a recent interpreter

of Marx, who then insists that Marx need not appeal to any moral standard in order to raise such criticisms. To evaluate this thought we need to examine the asserted contrast between moral and nonmoral values.

We appeal to nonmoral values when we recommend something as necessary for the satisfaction of our interests, the fulfillment of our needs, or the achievement of our conception of the good life. Our fundamental nonmoral values are our notions of what is fundamentally good for us. The answer to the question "What would make my life go best?" indicates my conception of the good, my fundamental nonmoral values.

Moral principles concern the distribution of nonmoral values--who should get the goods of the world. "Property should go to those who deserve it by their industry" is an example of a moral principle. "No one should profit by wrongdoing" is another. Let us say that moral principles are rules that are (a) universal--they apply to everybody, (b) impartial--everybody's interests are counted the same; the rules require us to assume an impersonal standpoint that exhibits no favoritism toward particular people, and (c) distributive--their function is to regulate the distribution of the good. In a slogan, nonmoral values specify what is good, moral principles specify what is right.

The "Communist Manifesto" passages quoted above and others in section II suggest that Marx regards morality as ideology. An ideology is a systematic view of the world belief in which serves class interests. Ideologies are tools or weapons in class struggle. According to Marx there is normally an element of illusion or self-deception in the assertion of an ideology or encouragement of allegiance to it. For example, according to Marx, Christianity in feudal times served as an ideology. People who believed in it and promulgated it might have thought they were doing so only for genuinely religious reasons, but the explanation for the prevalence of medieval forms of Christianity through this period is that widespread belief in this system of ideas served the interests of the dominant class of lords and landowning aristocrats. Marx appears to have believed not just that this or that particular morality is ideological but that morality as such is an ideological form of consciousness, one linked to the existence of class society and the psychological need of people to find some plausible way to justify the class rule they live under.

In the "Communist Manifesto," Marx has the bourgeois moral critic of communism assert this accusation: "There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience" (p. 489).

Marx's reply: All previous forms of society up to the present day have been marked by class rule and class exploitation. So it is not surprising that despite the vast cultural and moral differences among them there are elements in common, that might be mistaken for "eternal truths." But the anticapitalist revolution that establishes a communist society will mark a sharp break with all previous history, for this revolution will not substitute one form of class rule for another but will abolish class rule altogether. Hence: "The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas" (pp. 489-490). Marx appears to countenance the idea that the liberation that is bound up with the coming of communist society will include the liberation of individuals from the shackles of morality. Communist individuals will not be restricted in their choice of conduct by moral rules that tell them they "ought not" to do certain deeds that would be injurious to others. It's not that people will act in ways that are injurious to their fellows. Rather Marx's vision appears to be a world of harmony in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" and morality and coercion will drop away from human life. Apropos of these ideas one commentator has remarked that communism for Marx is not so much an alternative form of society as an alternative to society.

Three quick observations:

(1) Marx does not give us much concrete institutional detail to flesh out this evocative picture of a social order that is so little restrictive of human freedom that even simple moral rules such as "Don't lie!" and "Don't cheat!" are not needed to constrain people's conduct.

(2) The criticism of all morality as ideology, insofar as it is premised on Marx's theory of history, will remain entirely unpersuasive unless Marx can make good his claim to have discovered genuine laws of historical development that allow us to predict large-scale social changes and indeed to know in advance that they are inevitable. If the coming of communism is not inevitable, but might or might not occur, an individual could reasonably be swayed by moral argument to decide that communism would be morally undesirable and that one ought to fight its coming tooth and nail. (Even if we agreed with Marx that certain historical changes predicted by him were indeed inevitable, this does not commit us to accepting that these

changes are in any way desirable or good for human beings. The science of history cannot substitute for evaluation and morally informed criticism.)

(3) The suggestion that Marx rejects moral principles as ideologically tainted but continues to believe there are nonmoral values (such as the desirability of individual freedom and individual self-development) that can ground a critique of capitalism does not square with the "Communist Manifesto" text. The passages quoted above do not distinguish moral and nonmoral values; according to Marx supposed "eternal truths" of both kinds are equally conditioned by historical conditions, particularly the level of economic development. So according to the "Manifesto," if moral values are just a by-product of economic change and cannot provide a reasonable basis for social criticism, nonmoral values are likewise a by-product of economic change and cannot provide a reasonable basis for social criticism either. So the tension between Marx as social scientist of historical development and Marx as angry critic of capitalist evils remains puzzling.

3. Critique of the Gotha Program: Marx on Equality. It is natural to interpret Marx's notion of exploitation in terms of a background principle of equality. By "exploitation" Marx refers to the forced taking of an economic surplus from those who produce it by nonproducers who do not supply any comparable reciprocal benefit for the producers. That is, an exploited person is forced to labor for the benefit of an exploiter who does not reciprocate this benefit. In alternate language: An individual is exploited if she is forced to expend more labor than would be needed to produce the goods she consumes (or disposes over). Marx thinks exploitation so defined occurs under varied social systems ranging from ancient slavery through feudalism to capitalism.

I suggest that Marx's commitment to the idea that exploitation is generally a bad thing reveals his implicit allegiance to a moral principle of equality along the following lines: Other things equal it is morally bad if some people are worse off than others through no fault or voluntary choice of their own. Under capitalism, as Marx sees it, workers tend to be worse off than others through no fault or voluntary choice of their own, due to their propertylessness. The phenomenon of exploitation is closely correlated with violation of this principle of equality, with exploiters ending up better off than the exploited, and this is what is fundamentally wrong with capitalism in Marx's eyes (on this interpretation).

Evidence that Marx implicitly does subscribe to something like this principle of equality is found at pp. 530-531 of the Critique of the Gotha Program. There Marx distinguishes a lower and a higher stage of communism. The lower stage is defective (better than capitalism, but worse than higher-stage communism). Under the initial phase of communism the rule is to be: To each according to his labor contribution. More productive labor receives greater remuneration under this rule. Under this system the strong and the weak who work equally hard will get unequal pay. And brainy and stupid individuals who work equally hard and in that sense are equally deserving will get unequal pay. In the same amount of time, the talented or skilled person makes a greater productive labor contribution than less talented and less skilled mates, so will be paid more under lower communism.

According to Marx, this arrangement is superior to capitalism but still defective. The defects are remedied by the transition to a higher phase of communism, which will be organized on the principle. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Question: Why according to Marx is the lower phase of communism defective? My suggestion is that the higher phase of communism more closely approximates the fulfillment of the principle of equality discussed above, and this is the reason Marx deems higher stage communism to be superior to the lower stage. Under lower stage communism, even though the major means of production (e.g., factories) are socially owned, individuals retain private property rights in their own talents and skills and hence individuals with lesser talent will predictably end up worse off than others through no fault or voluntary choice of their own. Higher stage communism severs any direct link between what an individual produces and what she is entitled to consume, so (if the system works out nicely as Marx anticipates) the principle of equality will be fulfilled to a much greater degree. Marx envisages the higher stage communist economy as a sort of giant pot to which each individual contributes freely according to her ability (this is not onerous since labor is now richly rewarding and has become "life's prime want"), and from which each individual draws freely according to her own (reasonable) perception of her own needs.

Leaving aside the utopian sound of Marx's account, which provides no analysis at all of what will cause society to move from the lower to the higher stage, I want to call attention to the fact that according to Marx higher communism is superior to lower stage communism--one wants to say morally superior--on account of its superior distribution of the benefits and burdens of social life. The standard in terms of which

higher communism looks to Marx to be better is clearly an egalitarian norm. This interpretation is further confirmed by the fact that Marx asserts that in lower stage communism workers will not--and should not--receive the "full fruits" of their labor but instead will be forced to contribute to the support of the needy (those unable to work) and to a fund for future investment (that caters to the needs of future generations) (pp. 528-529). Why doesn't Marx count such forced taking from producers as exploitive? My suggestion is that forced deductions from one's wages that go to the support of the needy and to future generations can be expected to satisfy rather than violate the principle of equality and for this reason Marx evidently does not regard them as exploitive despite the fact that these deductions literally fit his technical definition of "exploitation." Another relevant passage in this connection is on p. 526: "One who does not work lives by the labour of others and also acquired his culture at the expense of the labour of others," Marx writes. I suppose he is referring to one who is able-bodied here.

The interpretation advanced in the preceding paragraph presumes that the principle of higher communism "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" is a principle of equal right, in effect a norm of distributive justice. Interestingly, Marx explicitly disavows this way of looking at the matter. Marx links his criticism of lower-stage communism with an objection against the very idea of "individual rights." The right to remuneration in proportion to one's labor contribution that the lower stage of communism enforces is, asserts Marx, "a right of inequality, in its content, like every right" (p. 530). Marx accordingly looks forward to the day when "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right can be crossed in its entirety" (p. 531). This passage suggests that Marx views higher stage communism as a form of society beyond individual rights and distributive justice altogether. Here again we see Marx voicing an antimoralist theme.

Marx's argument against any and all notions of individual rights goes as follows: 1. Every standard of right must abstract from individual differences among people and treat everybody the same according to the standard. 2. But individuals are different. 3. So applying an abstractly equal standard will yield substantially unequal outcomes. 4. So every abstract principle of right is defective (pp. 530-531).

Comment on Marx's argument: First of all, as stated it relies on the assumption that it is a defect of a proposed distributive principle that implementing it would yield substantially unequal outcomes. So this argument against rights nonetheless seems to rely on a background egalitarianism that is not questioned. Second, it's true that no moral principle treats everything about individuals as relevant to proper treatment of them. But why is this bad? Surely some characteristics of people (like skin color) are irrelevant to how they should be treated. Third, any social rule will have to be fairly simple. If you introduce too much complexity into social rules, their administration becomes overly complex and hence manipulable by agents and beneficiaries alike. (Think of the attempt to design an ideal system of welfare payments to the needy.) We can't base social rules on overly fine-grained distinctions that will be hard to detect reliably in practice. So any feasible social rule will gloss over relevant differences among people. We have to balance the value of keeping rules simple against the value of making the rules sensitive to morally relevant individual variations. That we have to make this tradeoff is no objection to social rules establishing individual rights as such. And finally, despite his argument that no social rule specifying individual rights can be adequate, Marx then proposes a social rule of higher-stage communism which can be regarded as establishing individual communist rights, and which arguably is adequate. Marx seems to be arguing that a certain problem is insoluble and then immediately proposing his own solution to it!

4. Alienation and Exploitation: Is Marx a Liberal? If Marx is a moralist, he propounds two distinctively different moral visions. One is the vision of a harmonious society that is a genuine community organized to provide unalienated labor for all. This Marxian vision has provoked the objection that it is a very nice ideal, but still it is just one person's ideal, which Marx blithely assumes everyone will voluntarily accept once communism is established. Marx doesn't recognize that in modern societies that refrain from using state power tyrannically, people will fan out in their fundamental beliefs and will never agree on any single vision of the good. Marx's vision of a society united on a commitment to unalienated labor is sectarian, narrow, much like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority of a few years back. Using state power to impose any single vision of the good, whether fundamentalist Christian or Marxist or whatever, deeply violates the spirit of liberalism.

Marx espouses another vision--that of an egalitarian society. Whatever may be the merits of the sectarianism charge applied to Marx's unalienated labor vision, I do not believe the charge can be made to stick against Marx's egalitarian vision. (Whether Marx's views on exploitation and equality are correct is a further question. The charge here is that Marx's views are illiberal.) The basic idea of Marx's

antiexploitation ethic is simply that the problem with society as presently organized is that vastly unequal income and wealth distribution means vastly unequal life chances for individuals. We can think of individuals as facing an array of life choices--kinds of lives that are available to them, among which they can effectively choose. Marx's egalitarianism holds that we should arrange institutions so as to make people's option sets or life choices as nearly equal as possible and as large as possible for everybody. Such an egalitarianism leaves individuals free to choose whatever lives they wish to lead, inspired by their own values, from the widest array of options we can provide for them. Whether we accept or reject such radical egalitarianism, we should recognize it is compatible with pluralism and diversity.

5. The Puzzle Solved? These remarks have not succeeded in solving the puzzle that I initially formulated. Is Marx a moralist or an antimoralist? The textual evidence rehearsed here is ambiguous. On the one hand, central to Marx's critique of capitalism is an antiexploitation norm that is best interpreted as an expression of an underlying commitment to an egalitarian principle of distributive justice. On the other hand, Marx frequently and explicitly repudiates the idea that he is espousing a norm of distributive justice or that concepts of justice, fairness or morality can make any useful contribution whatsoever to the interpretation and critique of capitalism. Marx envisages an ideal communist society that has succeeded in transcending not just private ownership of the means of production but the very concepts of morality and justice, conceived as chains on individual self-development. For an extended argument to the conclusion that Marx is a critic of notions of morality and justice and is not in any way, shape, or form committed to criticizing capitalism on the ground that it fails to satisfy ideals of morality and justice that he himself affirms, see the Allen Wood reading, "The Marxian Critique of Justice" (on the course web site). These notes argue that Wood bends the twig way too far toward the interpretation of Marx as antimoralist and downplays the evidence for seeing Marx as a moralist.

Without trying definitively to settle the question of what Marx really meant, we might raise the question, do Marx's antimoralist passages give us good reason to think that all morality is ideology or that all principles of justice and morality are completely bent to the service of justifying the basic institutions of the society in which they arise, hence are useless for social criticism or for deciding whether these institutions deserve our loyalty? I suspect there is an unwarranted slide in Marx's argument from "some" to "all." No doubt concepts of justice are often distorted by economic conditions that incline us to identify as right and fair what serves our interests or the interests of those who are powerful and respected in society. And it is credible that our conceptions of freedom and other nonmoral ideals of the good are likewise crimped by the economic conditions of our society. In some respects the morality we now accept may be as wrongheaded and self-serving as the morality of the slavemaster who conscientiously believed that slavery is morally fine because slaves are inferior people incapable of leading independent lives as free citizens. But does it really make sense to suppose that all our moral ideas must be tainted in this way? Is it plausible to think that moral principles like "Keep your promises" or "Don't tell lies" are really so much dust that capitalists throw in the eyes of ordinary people to confuse them? Marx the preacher of revolutionary transformation of society takes a surprisingly passive line on the possibility of individuals achieving in thought some critical perspective on the morals they grow up believing (without chucking morality altogether). We are doubtless sometimes dupes of ideology when we imagine we have won through to authentic principles of our own choosing. But this does not show that a partially rational and autonomous commitment to a morality is unattainable or not worth striving for.