

The Necessity of Moral Marxism

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Note to Readers: This paper is an abridgment of the second half of a larger paper titled "The Possibility and Necessity of Moral Marxism." In the first half of that paper I attempt to show that the central concepts of Marxism do not rule out reference to moral principles.

The problem of morality and evaluations is a difficult but central one in Marxist thought. On one hand, Marx did and Marxists do make scathing criticisms of capitalism and other socio-economic arrangements, and propose that we replace them with the better arrangement of communism. This assessment of social reality and the preference for one arrangement over another seems to require an appeal to some moral standard. On the other hand, important elements of Marxist theorizing seem to exclude such an appeal to moral principles. The concepts of ideology and historical materialism appear to imply that a Marxist must regard all talk of universal, objective moral standards as ideological illusion. Marxism seems to both require and prohibit the use of morality in making evaluations.

Some Marxists have sought to resolve this tension by developing an anti-moral Marxism. Allen Wood and others who take this approach seek to show that evaluations inherent in Marxist thought are not morally based, but rather are based on a collection of non-moral goods. Therefore, anti-moral Marxists tell us, no reference to moral standards is necessary.

In this paper I hope to show that the anti-moral model of Marxism is inadequate in accounting for the evaluations that Marxism makes, and then briefly outline some morally based models that I think are more effective. I will begin by stating the common ground between both moral and anti-moral Marxists, specifically that Marxism requires an evaluative perspective with certain characteristics. Then I will deal with some anti-moralist attempts to prove that this perspective need not refer to moral principles, and show why those attempts fail. I will conclude by sketching out some moralist evaluative perspectives that I think are original and promising.

Marxism's Evaluative Perspective

It is impossible to deny that Marx made sweeping value judgements and that those value judgements are central to the Marxist system of thought. Marx clearly regarded some social arrangements to be superior to others and advocated activity which would make the world "better." What is not clear is on what basis, or compared to what standard, Marx and Marxists can make such evaluations.

A consistent Marxist evaluative perspective must contain several elements. First, it must provide some standard or criteria for comparing types of social relations and making judgements about which of these systems is best, or at least better than another. These evaluations are an integral part of Marxist thought. For instance, Marxism clearly states that relations of production in which the laborer is not alienated from the object of his labor are preferable to those relations in which there is alienated labor. Any Marxist evaluative perspective must account for this preference.

A Marxist evaluative perspective must also include some kind of normative ethical principles. It is not enough to claim that one set of social relations is better than another; the Marxist must also be committed to taking an active and effective role in changing society to the preferred relations of production. To paraphrase Marx, the important thing is not merely understanding the world but *changing* it (Marx, p. 158). Thus any consistently Marxist evaluative perspective will show us not only why we ought to prefer one set of social relations over another but also why we should bother ourselves to bring the better society about.

The Inadequacy of Anti-Moralist Evaluative Perspectives

Anti-moral Marxists have sought to meet these requirements for an evaluative perspective in ways that do not require reference to, or use of, transcendent moral principles. In the light of their arguments that it is impossible to consistently hold both Marxist and moral points of view, their reasons for wanting not to refer to morality are obvious.¹

Allen Wood gives one such argument for a non-moral Marxist evaluative perspective. Wood claims that Marx's and the Marxist perspective can be classified as "moral" in the very broad sense of being far reaching

¹ These are dealt with in the first half of the larger paper and cannot be summarized here.

views about human well-being, but not in the more proper sense of the word, which designates what we *ought* to do or value, as opposed to what we do or value *simply because it is inherently satisfying*.² He thinks that this is the same sort of distinction that Kant and Mill make between moral and non-moral goods.³

Wood next claims that Marx and Marxists base their evaluative perspective on non-moral goods, such as self-actualization, health, security, comfort, community, and freedom.⁴ The implication of Wood's argument here is that these things are good, and social relations that prevent or restrain them bad, simply because these things satisfy us. Therefore no reference to transcendent moral goodness is needed. All social arrangements can be assessed as relatively good or bad to the degree that they allow for and facilitate these non-moral goods.

There are several problems with the simplistic definition of moral and non-moral that Wood gives here. Many human actions seem to satisfy his criteria for both moral and non-moral motivations. For example, I may choose to eat more nutritious food both because it will make me feel better and because I think it is a moral imperative for me to take care of my body. Wood's distinction gives us no reliable way of determining whether eating nutritiously is a moral or non-moral good.

In many cases, Wood's criteria for determining moralness are dependent on each other. A moralist will find many actions and evaluations to be inherently satisfying *because* they are moral, and a hedonist might very well think that inherently satisfying activities and evaluations are morally correct by virtue of the satisfaction they provide. If Wood is to be successful in claiming that the evaluative perspective of Marxism can rest on reference to principles of non-moral good, he must first provide an effective criterion for distinguishing moral and non-moral goods.

Wood might answer by saying that we can use the distinctions made by other philosophers such as Kant, Mill, and Hegel to determine what sorts of "goods" are moral or non-moral. In several places he does rely on those distinctions to show how the Marxist perspective differs from a moral one.⁵

² Wood, Allen. *Karl Marx*. New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989.

³ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 129.

⁴ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 127.

⁵ Wood, Allen. "Marx on Right and Justice: a Reply to Husami," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 8, 1978-79, p. 284-87.

This seems like a promising avenue, because both Kant's and Mill's ideas of the non-moral are much more refined and definitive than the one Wood gives. But that very refinement presents another problem.

Both Kant and Mill thought that non-moral goods were limited to immediate self-interest or satisfaction.⁶ But a Marxist evaluative perspective must give us some reason for taking actions that deny, or at least postpone, individual satisfaction. Wood's own Class Interest Thesis states that a consistent Marxist must adopt the interests of the proletariat class, not pursue one's own individual interests.⁷ It may be that the two interests ultimately converge, but the non-moral goods that Kant and Mill specify give us no reason to postpone our satisfaction until the class interests of the proletariat are victorious. If non-moral goods are to serve as the basis of the Marxist evaluative perspective, then Wood must show that some principle of self-denial or communal interest is a non-moral good.

It seems to me that the only way of showing the diverting of one's own interests to be "good" is by saying that one *ought* to do so. That would, by Wood's definition, make it a moral good. Thus, any consistently Marxist evaluative perspective *must* contain reference to at least one moral principle. Similar problems come up in trying to explain concepts such as self-actualization, freedom, and community as non-moral goods. The category of non-moral goods that Kant and Mill had in mind is too narrow to accommodate these ideas, and no alternative definition of moralness had been presented that is precise enough to be useful.

There is still another problem with Wood's attempt to base the Marxist evaluative on non-moral goods. If to be non-moralistic means not to make use of the word "ought," then there can be no ethically normative principles for an anti-moralist. Yet the Marxist evaluative perspective requires some such normative principles to tell us why we ought to change society. Therefore, it seems that Wood's or any other anti-moral evaluative perspective will fall short of what is required by the Marxist evaluative perspective.

Wood may be able to say that the most inherently satisfying activity for a human being is to take historically effective action directed at changing the economic basis of society, but that is quite a different thing than saying

⁶ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 129.

⁷ Wood, Allen. "Justice and Class Interests," *Philosophica*, Summer, 1989, p. 19.

that all people ought to take that action. This becomes clear when we imagine that someone disagrees with Wood's assessment of what is most satisfying. Such a person might claim that the most inherently satisfying activity for a human being is to sit on a couch and watch television. Marxists must, if they are to remain faithful to their revolutionary project, say that this person was not acting rightly, because on the Marxist account humans *ought* to be taking effective action to change society. But Wood has no basis for making that judgement. If he claims that the television watcher is incorrect and ought to be pursuing the non-moral goods of community, comfort, and self-actualization, the pursuit of non-moral goods has become a moral imperative, just as it does in Mill's philosophy.⁸ If Wood claims that the pursuit of non-moral goods is part of human nature, then he must either show that all people agree on what are the most inherently satisfying activities, or that those who do not agree with his own definition are wrong or irrational. The first option flies in the face of the central Marxist concepts of class conflict and historical change. The second option reduces Marxism to little more than an extremely rationalistic conception of human nature, and contradicts the Marxist thinking about ideology and materialism.⁹

Wood's attempt to construct an evaluative perspective based on non-moral goods does not yield a result which meets all of the demands set out earlier for what a consistently Marxist perspective must do. This implies that a morally based evaluative perspective is needed,¹⁰ and that anti-moral Marxism is inconsistent with the demands of Marxism itself. However, which moral principles Marxists should incorporate into their evaluative perspectives is not readily apparent. There are a number of moralist evaluative perspectives which meet the requirements for a Marxist evaluative perspective.

⁸ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 130.

⁹ Buchanan, Allen E. *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism*. Totowa, N.J., Rowman & Littlefield, 1982, p. 34-5.

¹⁰ Or that Marxism is a self contradictory system of thought that prohibits the use of moral principles and therefore can never hope to have the consistent evaluative perspective that it claims to have. I have addressed this possibility in the part of the paper not included here, where I argue that while the Marxist concept of ideology will make us suspicious of moral arguments and claims, nothing in the central concepts of Marxism prohibits the possibility of appealing to transcendent moral principles.

Some Moral Marxist Evaluative Perspectives

One such morally based Marxist evaluative perspective is suggested by G. A. Cohen. Cohen claims that Marxists ought to evaluate social arrangements in relation to how well they protect and encourage certain natural rights of human beings. In his view, Marxists have done themselves a disservice by completely discounting the idea that humans have certain natural rights that cannot morally be denied them. In reacting against Robert Nozick and other writers who use the "natural right" to hold private property as a defense of capitalist society, Marxists have traditionally denied that there are any such things as natural rights, and claimed that all talk of such rights is merely an ideological justification of the dominant class interests in any given society. Cohen suggests that to be consistently Marxist we ought not deny the existence of natural rights, but rather show that the natural rights of humans are something quite different from what Nozick and other apologists for capitalism have claimed. Instead of stating that all individuals have the right to hold private property, Marxists should assert that all of humanity has the inalienable right to hold property in common, to be free from exploitation, and to live in a society free from class conflict.¹¹

Cohen says that we come to know what the natural rights of human beings consist of through a process of intuitional rationalizing. Through moral reflection we can all come to see what rights we are entitled to, because the raw material for the moral principle of natural rights can be found in every rational human being.¹²

Cohen has been criticized for putting too much faith in the intuitive rationality of humans. Nielsen claims that if we take the Marxist conception of ideology seriously, we will see that each individual who intuitively rationalizes about what the natural rights of human beings are will inevitably come up with a system that favours his or her own class interests.¹³ I agree with Nielsen on this point, but I also think that this process that Cohen calls "intuitive rationalizing" can effectively be replaced by a materially undistorted

¹¹ Cohen, G.A. "Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism," *New Left Review*, April 1981, p. 91-8; Nielsen, Kai. "Marxist Immoralism and Marxist Moralism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Summer 1989, p. 224-7.

¹² Cohen, "Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism," p. 98-103; Nielsen, "Marxist Immoralism and Marxist Moralism," p. 228.

¹³ Nielsen, "Marxist Immoralism and Marxist Moralism," p. 228-30.

deliberation, in the Rawlsian tradition, that would eliminate the bias towards favouring one's own class interests when thinking about what natural rights come to be.

Kai Nielsen, Derek Allen, and many others have done a good deal of writing to construct a Utilitarian evaluative perspective for Marxists.¹⁴ They claim that the best way for a Marxist to evaluate social relationships is the degree to which they promote the greatest common good. The "goods" themselves need not be moral ones, just as Mill and Wood claimed they were not. But the pursuit of the greatest amount and degree of these non-moral goods for the largest number of people *is* a moral imperative, according to Utilitarian Marxism. On this basis, Utilitarian Marxists tell us that we ought to bring about a society in which the greatest common good is realized, namely communist society.

I agree with Miller that certain elements of Utilitarian morality seem difficult to mesh with central Marxist ideas about human nature. Given the Marxist understanding of the economic basis of society and of class conflict, it seems that it would be very difficult to identify a set of "goods" that would be applicable across all class distinctions, or that a reliable and non-biased standard of measurement for what does, or does not, promote the common good of *all* people could be developed.¹⁵ However, it is possible that the Utilitarian principle could be modified to eliminate these inconsistencies (as Nielsen attempts to do in "Marxism and the Moral Point of View"), and also the problems I alluded to about defining self-actualization and community as non-moral goods.

Harry Vander Linden and Allen Buchanan have both advocated a Marxist evaluative perspective based on Kant's ethical theory.¹⁶ Such a perspective would take the familiar categorical imperative, to act in such a way that you might reasonably wish that all others would act in the same way, as its highest moral principle. Social arrangements could be assessed as good or bad to the degree that the economic structure allowed and encouraged people to act in conformity with this principle. In this case the

¹⁴ Miller, Richard. *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power, and History*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1988, p.35-41; Nielsen, Kai. "Marx and the Moral Point of View," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, October 1987, p. 294-307.

¹⁵ Miller, *Analyzing Marx*, p. 38-40.

¹⁶ Buchanan, *Marx and Justice*, p.33-35; Vander Linden, Harry. "Marx and Morality: An Impossible Synthesis?" *Theory and Society*, January 1984, p.133-5.

Marxist would need to show that all people, if they were properly informed and reasoned correctly, would wish that others would act to bring about a communist society. If this could be shown successfully, then it would become morally imperative for all people to work for the transformation of society into communism.

This brief list is not intended to be exhaustive of all workable, morally based evaluative perspectives for Marxists. My purpose in this paper is not to advocate one particular form of moral Marxism, but rather to show that a proper understanding of Marxism will show that it requires the grounding of moral principles, and that several plausible systems of moral Marxism do exist. I do not think that every Marxist must hold *the same* moral principle in order to be consistent with the basic insights of Marxism, only that every Marxist needs to have some moral basis from which to make judgements.

Nor do I think that the Marxist system implies one particular set of moral principles. This is not to say that *any* moral principle will function in the Marxist system without contradiction; some types of moral principles, such as Nozick's natural rights theory, are clearly excluded. What I am claiming is that there are a variety of plausible moralistic evaluative perspectives for Marxists, including the three options I have summarized above, and the question of which one of them is "best" cannot be answered simply by an examination of the central concepts of Marxism.

While all Marxists would agree with me that there is a very definite evaluative perspective inherent to Marxism, many, such as Allen Wood, want to claim that this perspective need not, and should not, be a moral one. Their attempts to construct such a non-moral evaluative perspective for Marxists fall short of what a consistently Marxist perspective must do. Marxists are thus confronted with the necessity of moral Marxism, and with the challenge of constructing this morally based perspective in such a way that it does not conflict with the critique of moral beliefs that is central to Marxist social theory.

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