

**Rationality, ideology, and morality
in Marx's social theory**

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Marx's attitude towards moral philosophy is unforgiving. He groups it with religion and patriotism as an ideological expression of class interest which serves to rationalize and justify the existing relations of domination and control. "Law, morality, religion are to [the proletarian] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests."¹ This view represents a sweeping skepticism about the possibility of rational arguments for moral judgments; it suggests that morality is wholly subjective and dependent on existing class relations.

Attractive though this view is as an interpretation of many of Marx's statements about morality, however, it runs afoul of the deep-running normative commitments which are found throughout Marx's system. Marx plainly regards capitalism as repugnant in a variety of ways; and this evaluation seems to require some form of rational justification. Marx's system, therefore, needs to allow for the exercise of reason in moral judgment. But this need is inconsistent with the radical skepticism about morality suggested by the thesis of 'morality as ideology'.

In what follows I will argue for a conception of moral judgment which is both consistent with the theory of ideology, and sufficiently powerful to provide a framework for the normative judgments which Marx's system makes. A complete treatment of this issue requires a discussion of both the theory of ideology (i.e. a close examination of the ways in which moral theory and social morality function as ideological institutions), and the moral epistemology which Marx's system requires. In the present context I will concentrate on the latter point, since it is not generally conceded that Marx needs a normative theory at all. I will make the following points. First, I will argue on two grounds that Marx needs a theory of rational moral judgment; second, I will offer a discussion of human nature which will shed some light on the character of Marx's moral commitments; and finally, I will argue (in analogy with his theory of objective social science) that he can consistently provide a moral theory, and try to suggest what the main features of such a theory might be.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p.47.

1. Does Marx have or need a moral theory?

In this section I will argue that Marx's system embodies normative judgments from beginning to end, in the form of a critique of capitalism; that these moral judgments are supported by a fairly coherent moral theory (his theory of human nature); and that in consequence Marx is committed to the possibility of objectivity in moral judgment. Marx's moral view is most clearly contained in his early writings, in the theory of alienation and species-being. Here he works out a rich conception of man's nature and his place within society, and a simple conception of communism. This theory of human nature then constitutes the basis of his critique of bourgeois society and his theory of capitalism. I will argue, moreover, that these moral ideas underlie his scientific writings as well. *Capital* may be understood—in part at least—as Marx's effort to provide the empirical theory of society which supports this moral vision.

Marx's moral theory derives from his philosophical anthropology, or his theory of man's fundamental good. He maintains that man's good is realized when man is in a position to develop fully and autonomously through meaningful productive activity; and he argues that full human development can only occur within appropriate social relations.

Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species—both his own and those of other things—his object, but also . . . because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.²

It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being. Such production is his active species life. Through it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man; for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created. In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labour therefore tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him.³

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* in *The Revolutions of 1848*, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1974), p.78.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Consider the above proposition that the relationship of man to himself becomes objective and real for him only through his relationship to other men.⁴

Here we have a coherent basis for moral evaluation of social institutions. Human beings have a nature which they ought be enabled to realize; and the social institutions which systematically subvert this human nature are bad institutions. Human beings should be able to regard themselves as free; they should be in a position to objectify their natures through productive work; and they should be involved in social relations which reinforce their humanity and equality. Marx's conception of man's good therefore leads to a theory of how society must be organized in order to realize this good:

Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement and hence the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous periods of development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution.⁵

The fundamental values in this conception are those of freedom and full human development. Both Marx's critique of capitalism and his positive theory of socialism rest upon these values. Capitalism is abhorrent because it rests upon the destruction of human freedom, at least for the great majority of humanity; and socialism is desirable because it provides the cooperative social relationships within which alone genuine freedom is possible. These views constitute a consistent and richly developed theory of human nature; and they represent a significant basis for social criticism.

These views add up to a substantive moral theory which animates virtually all of Marx's work. Marx plainly regards these judgments as meaningful and rationally defensible; and from this it follows that he needs a moral epistemology which allows for rational argument concerning normative

⁴ Ibid., p. 333.

⁵ Ibid., p. 348.

issues. If a radical skepticism about morality is retained, then these judgments must be regarded as no less ideological than those of Locke or Kant.

So far we have discussed only relatively early writings in Marx's corpus. The conclusion that Marx's early writings have moral content is not especially controversial. Some authors (e.g. Louis Althusser) have maintained, however, that Marx's later thought detaches itself from these early value commitments, and is purely descriptive and scientific. But this interpretation is mistaken; normative critique is inseparable from the analytical theory contained in *Capital*. It is reasonable to interpret *Capital* as Marx's effort to provide an empirical explanation of the alienating character of capitalism, and thereby to vindicate the philosophical theory of alienation. In *Capital* he tries to construct a theory of capitalist social relations which shows how those relations entail domination and control, and give rise to the destruction of the human capacities of the worker. Large portions of *Capital* serve the sole function of documenting the alienating and destructive properties of capitalism: its systematic tendency towards extending and intensifying labor, its tendency towards ever greater division of task within the industrial process, and its inherently coercive social relations.

Capital intensifies and lengthens labor:

'What is a working day? . . . ' We have seen that capital's reply to these questions is this: the working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services. Hence it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the free play of the vital forces of his body and his mind, even the rest time of Sunday . . . -what foolishness! But in its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day.⁶

And it destroys the creative aspects of productive labor by segmenting the process into simpler tasks:

While simple cooperation leaves the mode of the individual's labour for the most part unchanged, manufacture thoroughly revolutionizes it,

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital I* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p.375.

and seizes labour-power by its roots. It converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations, just as in the states of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow. Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation.⁷

Finally, throughout *Capital* Marx stresses the dominating character of capitalist relations—just as he did in the theory of alienation. Capitalism is inconsistent with genuine human freedom, because it necessarily represents the domination of one class by another.

He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning.⁸

First, the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs; the capitalist takes good care that the work is done in a proper manner . . . Secondly, the product is the property of the capitalist and not that of the worker, its immediate producer.⁹

Capital also developed into a coercive relation, and this compels the working class to do more work than would be required by the narrow circle of its own needs. As an agent in producing the activity of others, as an extractor of surplus labour and an exploiter of labour-power, it surpasses all earlier systems of production.¹⁰

In short, numerous passages in *Capital* make it fairly clear that Marx's basic moral conception is unchanged. Freedom and full human development remain the fundamental values, against which social systems are to be evaluated. The following passage from *Capital I* is particularly clear.

Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so

⁷ Ibid., p. 481.

⁸ Ibid., p. 280.

⁹ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 425.

in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis.¹¹

In this passage no less than in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* Marx is expressing his commitment to the value of human freedom and self-realization.¹²

These passages have indicated Marx's continuing commitment to the theory of human nature expressed in the 1844 manuscripts. Even more fundamental than these frequent passages, however, is the fact that *Capital* is intended to be an objective account of those social relations singled out by his theory of human nature: private property, division of labor, and relations of domination and control. *Capital* is Marx's effort to provide a scientific explanation of the necessity of alienation, given private property in means of production. It therefore possesses both analytical and normative characteristics.

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that Marx's theory of capitalism rests upon a system of basic moral commitments, from early to late; the theory of man's nature and his relation to society which Marx constructs in his early writings continue to inform and guide his social and economic theories in his later works. This in turn emphasizes the importance of constructing a moral epistemology which is consistent with other elements of Marx's system.

This conclusion is further confirmed by a second line of thought, which concerns Marx's conception of the identity of theory and practice. Marx maintains that human activity is the fundamental category among social and cultural products, and that rationality and knowledge arise out of that activity. Knowledge serves the function of allowing more effective forms of productive activity; reason cannot be separated from its origins and role in practice. (The second and eighth theses on Feuerbach make these points most clearly.) Given,

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital III* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p.820.

¹² Edward Thompson offers a similar analysis of the descriptive materials in *Capital* in *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), pp.57-60.

then, that the notion of practical activity is central for Marx, it is worth noting that action requires two forms of rationality. First, it requires rational beliefs about the physical properties of nature, so that man can manipulate nature to achieve his ends. And secondly, it requires some kind of rational assessment of ends and purposes. Man's fundamental purposes in his activity are not created by some external agency; rather, they are self-imposed; and Marx's general commitment to rationality implies that man ought to be able to think rationally about his goals and purposes. The latter form of reason, however, is not instrumental reason, but rather normative reason: it has to do with the conditions of life we take to be good, and the limitations we respect on the means we choose to pursue those goods. And such principles constitute a moral theory.

Marx is not in principle opposed, therefore, to the undertaking of trying to formulate a social or human ideal. Any practical action requires a rational appraisal of the end to be achieved; and that is no less true in politics than in other areas of deliberate human action. In the case of politics, this means that we must have some conception of the ultimate values which we take to define our good; and we must have a conception of the social and economic institutions within which this ideal can best be realized. Marx certainly had such a conception (the value of the autonomous and full development of the individual); and so he needs to have a meta-ethical theory which can provide a framework within which that conception is meaningful and rationally justifiable.

Marx's system appears to be committed—whether or not Marx recognizes the commitment—to the possibility of a rational and critical discourse about means and ends. Value commitments are inextricably bound up with Marx's system from beginning to end; and given his theory of practice, it ought to be possible to deliberate rationally about ends. Both these lines of thought lead to the same conclusion: Marx's system is not wholly coherent unless it is possible to describe a theory of normative discourse which allows for some rational force for normative judgments. The next question we need to entertain, therefore, is whether the theory described here is a genuine moral theory; for it might be argued that it is only a descriptive theory of human nature.

2. What is the relation between a theory of human nature and a moral theory?

A central question which arises in connection with Marx's normative judgments concerns the relation between moral theory and theories of human nature and society; for Marx's criticisms of capitalism derive from his theory of man's nature. One might argue, however, that (1) theories of human nature are part of psychology rather than moral philosophy, and (2) that they afford a basis

of criticizing social institutions which is not based on moral judgment. And similarly, one might argue that the theory of socialism is defended simply on the grounds that it best suits man's nature.

There are many different forms of theories of human nature; nonetheless, these may be classified in the following way. First, there are theories of human nature which are advanced as part of empirical psychology or biology. Hobbes is perhaps the foremost author of theories of this sort; his theory of the state is based on an account of what man is by nature, and what social consequences follow from this nature when men congregate. What are man's unavoidable psychological dispositions and inclinations? Every man is naturally equal in strength and 'faculties of mind', and naturally impelled to seek to preserve his own life; this equality and prudence leads first to diffidence, then to war between men; and this natural condition of war can only be overcome by the creation of an artifice: the commonwealth, the 'Leviathan'. For Hobbes, then, human nature is taken as given, neither good nor bad, and a basis for social theory: what sort of civil life would we expect among creatures having this nature? And what recourse could such creatures find in order that each might preserve his own life more securely?

A contemporary example of such theories is found in sociobiology. Edward O. Wilson writes: 'Human nature can be laid open as an object of fully empirical research, biology can be put to the service of liberal education, and our self-conception can be enormously and truthfully enriched'.¹³

Theories of this sort we may call 'psychological' theories; they include those of Hobbes, the sociobiologists (man is by nature territorial, or aggressive, or predatorial), and others. Their purpose is to reveal man's most basic psychological dispositions and inclinations, the way man would behave in the absence of any artificial constraints. In these theories there is an implicit contrast between nature and society: for Hobbes, man's nature is revealed in the state of nature; and it is suppressed or at least regulated by the political state. For sociobiology, man's nature was shaped in the distant evolutionary history of the species, prior to the creation of language and social organization. In each case, the implication is that man's nature reappears whenever the thin veneer of civilization is stripped off: culture controls nature in an uneasy context. If there is an implication in such theories for morality, it is that the natural is beastly.

The other model we have of theories of human nature is Aristotle's. Its distinctive feature is that man's nature is generally present only in potential, requiring appropriate activity by man (and appropriate social circumstances) to

¹³ Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1978), p.2.

make it actual. Aristotle's theory is a teleological theory: man realizes his nature by becoming something which he presently is not-fully rational, fully virtuous, etc. Theories of this type have a clearly normative component: a thing should actualize its nature; so to conclude that an X is unnatural is to conclude that it is defective. Notice how sharply this conception differs from the psychological model sketched above: for Hobbes the state is wholly 'artificial' and unnatural, but at the same time the sole ground of morality; while for Aristotle an 'unnatural' state is a monstrosity.

In each case we must ask how we may come to know what man's nature is. This question is more difficult to answer when applied to teleological theories. For psychological theories of human nature purport to be grounded in empirical science: psychology, evolutionary biology etc. The claims of psychological theories are intended to be factual claims, which may be evaluated using empirical methods. Teleological theories do not have this avenue of investigation, however; for we cannot experimentally examine a thing's potential properties, but only its actual properties. Aristotle attempts to solve this problem in several ways. First, he argues that we can determine the nature of a thing by witnessing its full development in 'normal' circumstances. We know, for example what the nature of an acorn is, from our experience of the full life cycle of the oak tree, in both normal and abnormal circumstances. This account will not do for human nature, however, since we cannot easily draw the distinction between normal and abnormal circumstances. (For example, a bad state may stunt the development of all its citizens.) Consequently, we need some other way of establishing what man's nature is. It is in this context that Aristotle advances his less satisfying argument relating 'nature' to 'essence': whatever distinguishes a thing from all other things is its essence; and it is its nature to fully develop its essential properties.

Let us now try to answer the question we began with in this section: namely, what is the relation between theories of human nature and moral theories? Concerning psychological theories, we may conclude that there is no important relation at all; in particular, a psychological theory of human nature does not function as a possible ground for moral judgment. It plays the role rather of an empirical belief about man's psychological dispositions. Theories of this sort may be used as the basis of criticism of moral theories or social institutions: we might argue, for example, that our theory of human nature shows that man cannot satisfy the requirements of a given moral theory. (This would be true if our theory of human nature showed that man cannot voluntarily accept heavy risk of death, whereas our moral rules imposed a duty of rescue no matter what the risk.) And a psychological theory could provide the basis for criticism of a particular set of social institutions; e.g. that a given set of social institutions will be continually unstable because they are inconsistent with

human nature. (This is the claim being made when it is argued that socialism can never work because it requires altruism, whereas man is by nature self-interested.) Neither of these criticisms is a moral judgment, however; each is a technical judgment concerning the fit between man's psychology and given social institutions. They are similar to the advice given to zoo-keepers: don't keep the lions and the lambs in the same enclosure, since lions tend to eat lambs.

Teleological theories of human nature stand in a different relation to moral theory, however. For if man's nature is that set of properties and dispositions which he ought to actualize, then the theory has moral implications: each person should strive to realize his nature, society ought to be arranged so as to facilitate individuals' actualizing their nature, and so forth. Teleological theories, that is, assert that there is intrinsic value in a person's becoming what he is by nature; and this value must be taken into account by the right acting individual and society.

Marx's theory of human nature shares aspects of both these types. On the one hand, Marx believes that his conception on human nature is empirically established, e.g. he writes in *The German Ideology*:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.¹⁴ On the other hand, Marx's criticisms of bourgeois society depend chiefly on the complaint that man's nature is stunted and distorted within bourgeois social relations. This implies, first, that man's nature is not inherent or inevitably realized, but is rather merely potential; and secondly, that it ought to be realized. Here Marx's effort to overcome the rigid distinction between fact and value is especially evident; for this theory is both empirical and normative.¹⁴

On balance, then, Marx's system is guided by a teleological theory of human nature. His criticisms of capitalism are not merely technical but moral. Capitalism is defective because it blocks individuals from actualizing their human nature; it stunts and dwarfs their development. Marx does not share a strictly psychological theory of human nature with Hobbes; nor does he share the usual counterpart of such a theory: a conception of society as an external and artificial instrument by which individuals pursue their private interests. Marx

¹⁴ *The German Ideology*, p. 42.

rather shares Aristotle's proposition that man is a social animal: a being whose nature can only be realized within society. We may conclude, therefore, that Marx's theory of human nature plays a clear normative role in his system.

3. Can Marx consistently advance a moral theory?

If Marx is not in principle opposed to the project of formulating a moral conception, then what is the force of the 'morality as ideology' position which is generally attributed to Marx? Here Marx's view needs to be more complex than the slogan allows. Marx unquestionably-and evidently rightly-maintains that social idealizing is inevitably influenced by the existing set of class relations, and that it is impossible to wholly 'transcend one's time in thought'.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.¹⁵

Typically, in fact, moral philosophy serves the specific function of expressing and developing the system of values corresponding to the existing system of class relations. However, this general caution does not entail that moral philosophy cannot be conducted objectively or rationally. Rather, it is possible for Marx to maintain that social criticism can be based on a relatively objective and rational form of analysis.

In fact, we must distinguish between morality as a socially embodied set of regulative principles, and moral criticism. The former is a social force, which serves relatively clear social functions -legitimation, pacification, and the preservation of order. Marx's theory of ideology bears directly on this set of regulative principles (common morality); for his theory maintains that these principles are chiefly shaped in accordance with the interests of the ruling class. Whereas other sociologists emphasize the collective interest which is expressed in common morality (e.g. Durkheim), Marx emphasizes its class character. Bourgeois morality, emphasizing respect for property, acceptance of authority, and acquiescence in inequalities of wealth and power, serves the function of preserving the conditions of class domination and control.

The category of moral criticism, however, is distinct from common morality. It has to do with the capacity of the critical intellect to reflect upon

¹⁵ Karl Marx, 18th Brumaire in *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings* Volume 2, ed. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage, 1975), p.146.

moral principles and fundamental goods, to discover the consequences of those principles, and to make judgments about the acceptability of alternative moral standards. It is this capacity—if it exists at all—which constitutes the ground of rationality in morality.

Once having drawn this distinction, it is possible to maintain that one aspect of morality is completely determined by ideology, while at the same time maintaining that reason has its role in the other aspect. It is possible, that is, to maintain that common morality is simply ideology, and at the same time hold that reason can stand above ideology in critically deliberating on moral issues.

In raising this issue of the possibility of rational normative judgment, we may consider a useful analogy: Marx's view of the possibility of objectivity in social science. For some interpreters of Marx's work have taken his theory of ideology to imply a radical subjectivism in knowledge itself. On this interpretation, all beliefs about society—normative and factual—are ideological, and not rational or objective; one's beliefs are mere reflex to one's position within society. Marx emphatically rejects this form of skepticism, however. He maintains, rather, a qualified objectivism in science. He holds that it is difficult to be objective in the area of social knowledge, and that somewhat special social circumstances must obtain as a background for disinterested social inquiry; but that objective social inquiry is possible in principle. Consider, for example, his analysis of the development of political economy in Europe after 1832.

In France and England the bourgeoisie had conquered political power. From that time on, the class struggle took on more and more explicit and threatening forms, both in practice and in theory. It sounded the knell of scientific bourgeois economics. It was thenceforth no longer a question whether this or that theorem was true, but whether it was useful to capital or harmful, expedient or inexpedient, in accordance with police regulations or contrary to them. In place of disinterested inquirers there stepped hired prizefighters; in place of genuine scientific research, the bad conscience and evil intent of apologetics.¹⁶

Here it is clear that Marx recognizes the possibility of 'disinterested inquiry', 'genuine scientific research', and 'truth'. The classical political economists provide examples of such inquiry. At the same time Marx maintains that objective scientific research requires special social circumstances; and when society enters into a period of intense class conflict, objectivity is no longer easily assumed.

¹⁶ *Capital I*, p. 97.

Marx's theory of social knowledge, then, is more complex than the narrow determinism of belief by social relations which is sometimes attributed to him. He maintains that ideology intrudes on social belief, and that systems of belief become weapons of class conflict in periods of intense class opposition. The upshot of this conclusion is that one must carefully and critically assess the ideological content of efforts in social science. But he maintains that objective and disinterested inquiry are in principle possible; and he cites a variety of examples from the history of classical political economy which have those properties. Rational and disinterested social inquiry is possible; and as a consequence, so is objective social science. It is possible, therefore, to consider social sciences on the basis of rational criteria of theory adequacy and empirical support, quite apart from the class position of the scientist.

I maintain that Marxian theory both can and should take a similar position on the question of the rational standing of social criticism and moral theory. Moral theory is perhaps even more susceptible to distortion through the influences of ideological beliefs, given its proximity to the principles of order within society; but it is in principle possible to think rationally about questions of value, and to offer reasons in favor of or against various normative principles. Marx ought not therefore be opposed to moral philosophy in general; rather, he ought to demand critical attention to the ideological uses of moral theory and the ideological content of specific moral theories, and at the same time he ought to contribute positively to the issues of rational social criticism and value theory which necessarily confront us.

On my view, then, the attitude of Marxist theory to traditional moral theory ought to be exactly that which Marx took towards classical political economy: a stance of critical attention. Marx believed that classical political economy contained a mixture of valuable insights into its subject matter, as well as clearly ideological presuppositions about man and society which required demystification. In the same way, Marxist theory can acknowledge the progressive character of much moral philosophy, while offering an incisive critique of its ideological content. Just as Marx regarded his economic writings as a 'Critique of Political Economy', which preserved the insights of political economy while laying bare its ideological content, so may Marxist theory engage in a positive 'Critique of Moral Philosophy'.

4. What sort of moral theory can Marx offer?

This line of thought suggests that a theory of rational moral discourse is compatible with the theory of ideology. If this conclusion is reasonable, what sort of theory of morality might be most suitable to Marx's theory as a whole? Surely not an apriori and transcendental theory similar to Kant's; Marx is plainly

opposed to the idea of ahistorical moral truths. If we give up the aim of discovering immutable moral truths, then in what sense can moral inquiry be rational and objective? Here my answer is that objectivity derives from the most extensive possible use of reason and disinterested discourse-not from 'correspondence to moral truth'. We are able to critically examine certain of our commitments and values in terms of others; to strive to create a more consistent system of values and moral principles; to try to develop as fully as possible the consequences of our commitments; and to formulate new commitments as the old become inadequate as a basis for human life. At every stage such a discourse will be conditioned by relatively dogmatic assumption of background commitments. But relative to these commitments, other values may be critically evaluated; and no commitment - even the most fundamental -is immune from criticism. Just as philosophers of science have come to replace global justification by local justification, so in value theory; we must give up the hope of providing an absolute justification for the system of value commitments and moral principles as a whole, and settle for a rational assessment of certain parts of the system in terms of others, and allow for change within the system. This procedure closely corresponds to the element of moral philosophy which John Rawls describes as 'socratic': the dialectical unraveling of a moral system through the interrelations of its basic principles, and the relation of the system as a whole to the fabric of human life.

A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view.¹⁷

On Rawl's view of justification, moral philosophy is a process within which moral principles are considered in light of considered judgments; and principles and judgments are deliberately adjusted until a stable system emerges, in which principles and judgments mutually support one another. This is the condition which Rawls calls reflective equilibrium; and the system of moral principles which emerges through this process is the morally correct set. To be sure, 'our' considered judgments are merely the judgments which historically particular men and women make under socially specific circumstances. These men and women acquire their moral beliefs and attitudes through plainly ideological institutions (e.g. family, religion, school); and it would be unreasonable to suppose that the resulting considered judgments are independent of the prevailing ideology. Consequently, this form of justification cannot serve to establish the transcendental correctness of the moral theory, or free it from the charge of expressing ideologically specific assumptions about man and society.

¹⁷ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971), p.21.

The most it can do is to bring to the surface the principles which underlie the moral practices of the existing community, and subject those practices to a limited form of rational criticism.

This conception of moral philosophy is an important contribution to moral epistemology which Marxian theory can well profit from. Rawls's theory of justice reflects deeply ideological presuppositions, which Marxian theory ought to uncover. But at the same time Rawls works out a conception of moral inquiry, and a theory which embodies central human values, which Marxian theory may profitably attend to.

Moral philosophy and rational social criticism, on this view, come down to a process of critical reflection on received values and moral principles. The more clearly the moral principles we hold are formulated, the more sharply we examine them for hidden commitments, the more rationally we will be able to criticize and evaluate various forms of human conduct and human society. The development of systems of values and moral principles is a fundamental part of the development of culture, and a particular case of man's self-creation.

This conception of moral philosophy is consonant with Marx's theory of man as a self-creator. Marx maintains that man has no fixed, eternal nature; rather, he creates himself and his world through productive activity. And his creations include the cultural and the axiological as well as the material and the technological: man creates his own fundamental values and moral principles. Rationality in this area consists of man's power to think clearly and as far as possible-disinterestedly about the ends of his actions and about his own purposes. By creating tasks and goals for himself, and new goals and purposes as the old are achieved, man creates himself; and he also creates the framework of purposes and principles which serve to orient his activity. There is no fundamental truth of morality, no set of self-evident propositions which man has merely to discover; and yet at the same time morality is not wholly subjective. Rather, moral truths are created through the creation of man's values, and one system of fundamental commitments leads to others in a process in which rational criticism plays a significant role.