

MARX'S ETHICS AND ETHICAL THEORY

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Once we recognize that "good" is not a quality [but a relation], there is not necessarily a contradiction between your calling X good and my calling it not good. If this view is sound, there can be no genuine study of the ethical contribution of Marx's thought. There can also be no ethical science.¹

Two recent trends highlight the problem of the relation between Marx's ethics and ethical theory. To left-wing radicals in the West and to revisionist philosophers in Eastern Europe, the basis of Marx's ethics has been sought in the concept of alienation. To Soviet philosophers and to old-line Marxists, Engels' progressive and scientific world view continues to be regarded as the foundation of Marx's ethics. Yet neither of these trends, Kamenka argues, has been distinguished by a philosophical grasp of the problems that must be solved by a science of morals.² Neither has shown an interest in dealing with ethical theory freshly and critically; consequently, neither has come to a full appreciation of Marx's contributions to ethical theory and to the science of moral behaviour.

Although in the preface to his recent book Kamenka indicates that his purpose is to elucidate the ethical vision of Communism that remained with Marx all his life, he intermittently shifts his attention from the ethical foundations of Marxism to the Marxian foundations of ethics. Actually, his interest in finding the key to Marx's ethical views in Marx's early philosophical writings tends to be eclipsed, as the book progresses, by a philosophical interest not in Marx's ethics, but in Marx's contributions to ethical theory. Even though Marx himself wrote nothing directly on problems of moral philosophy and failed to analyse critically the meaning of moral terms and the criteria for distinguishing ethical demands from non-ethical ones, none the less Kamenka argues that Marx's writings provide the basis for a coherent science of ethics divorced from its traditional normative confusions. Marx's ethical vision was not simply utopian, but had an implicit empirical content "which ethical theory cannot ignore and on the basis of which a positive ethical science becomes possible."³ Believing that Marx failed to articulate the basis of his own ethical vision, Kamenka endeavours to do it for him by a reasoned elucidation of the meaning of certain ethical distinctions that Marx was capable of appreciating only intuitively.

In criticism of Kamenka's views on Marxism, ethics and ethical theory I argue, first, that the effort to elucidate a science of ethics, on the basis of **Marx's** theory or any other theory, is self-defeating; second, that Marxism is altogether devoid of ethical foundations or presuppositions; and third, that **Marx's** ethical theory helps to explain behaviour and to guide policy decisions without, however, providing ethics with a scientific foundation.

I

Let me begin, then, by giving a brief outline of Kamenka's views on the science of ethics. In the interest of clarity Kamenka distinguishes sharply between a scientific or positive ethics, which makes a contribution to human knowledge, and the traditional normative morality that does not. To be avoided is the confusion between the "good" and the "right." Actually, goods are not logically obligatory nor is right behaviour intrinsically good. A scientific ethics cannot be concerned with prescribing duties or with guiding behaviour because goods are not a moral concern of the scientific investigator. Moreover, goods are qualities of character and not of human relations, except as the latter express qualities of **character**.⁴ Good and evil qualify ways of living, not principles and policies, ends and means. The latter are, presumably, inferior to the human beings who adopt and pursue them. Positive ethical distinctions "**occur** among motives and the social activities with which these motives are connected"; they "do not occur among the objectives which motives or activities **pursue**."⁵ Not beauty, but the love of beauty is good; not deception, but the love of deception is evil.

At the root of **Marx's** errors and those of his followers, Kamenka argues, lies a failure to distinguish sharply between the normative and descriptive aspects of ethical theory. This confusion of scientific and normative conceptions of ethics is closely linked with the confusion of ethical qualities and ethical relations. The scientific character of ethical judgments can be most easily established if good is a quality and not a relation, for the assertion that an object or an activity has a given quality, like weight, size or shape, is true or false independent of any relations into which it may enter. Just as the assertion that this table is red does not by itself imply that I am attracted to it, so "the assertion that X has the positive quality 'good' would not imply that I necessarily seek, commend or require it."⁶ To treat "good" as a quality would be to open the way to making ethics a science, while shearing it of its normative pretensions. However, the moralist concerned with right and wrong, the rights and duties of men, "cannot afford to see 'good' as 'merely' a quality which some display or seek and others lack or reject." For him it must also be a relation, something obligatory or, at least, pursued for its own sake, such that it would be either irrational or wrong to reject it. Since most normative conceptions of ethics have

scientific pretensions or make scientific claims by which they try to establish the truth of a particular morality, they actually "require the confusion or the amalgamation of qualitative and relational treatments of good."⁸

Unlike qualities, relations require two terms: "the demander as well as the demanded, the pursuer as well as the pursued, the obligor as well as the obliged."⁹ But what is right or wrong, permissible or forbidden by one moral code may be rejected by another. What is right in terms of one morality may be wrong in terms of another precisely because interests, attitudes, values conflict. What Kamenka is saying is that all normative judgments are judgments of right and wrong, that they are relative to conflicting groups and interests, that they are neither true nor false, that they divide instead of uniting men, that they are coercive instead of free.

For ethics to be a science, then, it must have for its content qualities instead of relations. It cannot have right and wrong for its subject matter. Kamenka links the distinction between good and evil with a traditional theme of moral and political philosophy, the distinction between harmony and discord, freedom and servility.¹⁰ By "good" he means those motives and social activities following directly from them that display the qualities of spontaneity, idealism or devotion to movements transcending the individual, aspiration instead of fear, qualities like love and courage, enterprise and the productive spirit. "Goods require no censorship, no punishments, no protection as part of their ways of working"; in contrast, evils produce egoistic attitudes and behaviour that "require censorship, suppression, punishment and protection; they seek prior guarantees of security; they display a fundamental instability and incoherence."¹¹ Goods are those motives that are free, enterprising and co-operative; evils are those motives that are servile and divisive. It follows that normative ethics itself is "the product of evil motives, of that search for security which is characteristic of unfree activities."¹²

For ethics to be a science, Kamenka asserts, it must have for its subject matter human character, and human behaviour only as it expresses qualities of character. It must have for its content qualities instead of relations; otherwise the statement "X is good" can be neither true nor false. But can there ever be a science of ethics analogous to physics or biology or even psychology or sociology? Kamenka gives no assurance whatever that a science of ethical qualities could make specific predictions or increase our control over nature, at least no predictions that could not also be made by psychologists or sociologists. A science of ethics resembles rather a system of social controls in which normative sanctions of right and wrong, including normative statements that are neither true nor false, function as part of a science of social engineering. Normative statements can increase the likelihood or unlikelihood of certain forms of behaviour, thereby leading to warranted

predictions. Indeed, such statements have become an indispensable part of the strategy and tactics of political movements.

In conceiving of good and bad as qualities instead of relations, Kamenka links this distinction with Marx's own distinction between classless and class societies, freedom and servility. But Kamenka's definitions of good and bad are arbitrary and misleading. He does not say that "good" is simply a shorthand expression for motives and the corresponding activities flowing directly from them that display the qualities of spontaneity, harmony or co-operation. Instead, he treats good as a quality which, on careful scrutiny, can be described in these terms. We are misled, then, into believing in the possibility of a positive science of ethics based upon descriptions of independent ethical qualities. But, as a matter of fact, all Kamenka gives are prescriptions concerning the use of ethical terms that contribute not one iota either to the clarification of old knowledge or to the discovery of new facts. An ethical language is presented for our adoption without any corresponding rationale. The resulting proliferation of terms for the same mundane experiences, hopes and aspirations misleads us into believing that the world is richer with ethical experiences than without.

Contrary to his expectations, Kamenka has succeeded only verbally in isolating ethical qualities from a normative content. For the "good," as he defines it, is an honorific term. Although it does not imply any obligation to pursue it, it does imply some kind of ideal. Ideals, like rules, are one kind of norm; like models, they guide our conduct without being either right or wrong. Since ideals, like rules, are not discovered but prescribed, Kamenka is mistaken in believing that what he calls goods are qualities and not also relations. For to call a quality of character good involves a judgment of value, a normative judgment that in effect affirms the pre-eminent importance of the quality singled out for honorific mention, study and attention. A vocabulary of goods resembles a list of titles of nobility in distinguishing qualities for special reverence and esteem, in effect prescribing models and conditioning us to look upon them with respect. By defining "good" the way he does, Kamenka manages to dignify the character of an individual, his motives, attitudes and feelings at the expense of his behaviour. He is saying that it matters less what a person does than what he is, thus not only telling us what Kamenka considers to be important, but what in fact is or is not important. And this is presumptuous to say the least.

II

It has become almost a dogma among philosophers that every social theory, however scientific, has implicit ethical presuppositions of its own. Thus Marx's distinction between freedom or self-determination and servility or dependence stems, according to Kamenka, from an implicit ethical distinction between good and bad. But Marx did not

employ ethical language in his mature works. The slanted interest, charged language and acrid tone of Capital imply not moral indignation, but simply outrage at the conditions of exploitation. We know that Marx aspired to a free society and detested man's condition of servility; we do not know that he considered the one moral and the other immoral. For it is one thing to assert that he approved of co-operation and hated exploitation; it is another to suppose that this is an ethical instead of a psychological statement, an assertion of value instead of fact. Thus it is important to distinguish the psychological presuppositions of Marxism, such as those just mentioned, from the corresponding ethical presuppositions that are currently imputed to Marx, but without sufficient evidence.

Did Marx have any ethical views or was he indifferent or even hostile to ethical values? Contrary to Kamenka, who discovers an ethical vision as well as a philosophical ethic in the writings of the young Marx, in Marx's later writings there is an explicit scorn for both ethical principles and moral philosophy. What is the significance of Marx's repudiation of the language of ethics if not the repudiation of ethics as well? Or is it possible to have an ethic formulated in a non-ethical language? Since it is impossible to embrace a theology while rejecting its language, is it any more likely that one can have an ethical vision without a special language to describe it? The evidence of Marx's later writings indicates that he no more had a vision of the good than a vision of God. His contempt for philosophical ethics followed logically from his scepticism concerning the existence of good and bad qualities.

Consider, for example, the following passages in which he unqualifiedly rejects the ethical or moral point of view:

The connection between the pleasure-experiences of individuals . . . and the class relations of their time . . . could not be discovered until the conditions of production and communication of the traditional world had been criticized, and the opposition between the bourgeois view of life and the proletarian socialist and communist point of view created. Therewith all morality—whether it be the morality of asceticism or that of the philosophy of pleasure—was proved to be bankrupt.¹³

"Undoubtedly," it will be said, ". . . communism abolishes . . . all religion, and all morality instead of constituting them on a new basis." What does this accusation reduce itself to? . . . 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.¹⁴

I have dealt more at length with. . . "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. . . by means of ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French socialists.¹⁵

In effect, Marx is saying that the moral point of view, like the religious one, is cognitively pretentious as well as hypocritical; that moral ideas are ideological expressions of class antagonisms; that Communism will abolish morality along with religion by undermining their economic and social foundations; and that the socialist counter-morality to the dominant bourgeois morality of our times consists of obsolete verbal rubbish and misleading ideological nonsense more harmful than beneficial to the Labour movement.

But what shall we say concerning **Marx's** Address to the working classes, containing the preamble and provisional rules of the First International? For there he identifies the emancipation of the workers with a moral struggle, while affirming that all individuals and groups belonging to the International "acknowledge truth, justice and morality as the bases of their conduct towards each other, and towards all men without regard to colour, creed or **nationality**."¹⁶ Marx morally enjoins the workers "to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of **nations**."¹⁷ In fact, these passages are the source of Lenin's commendation of the "basic" and "elementary rules of social intercourse" and, more recently, of **Khrushchev's** references to the "elementary standards of morality and justice," which apply in all societies and are morally binding upon all **classes**.¹⁸ The current Soviet acceptance of a humanist ethics, a socialist humanism involving a progressive moral outlook and the conviction of continuing moral progress, is seemingly warranted in calling itself Marxist, at least with reference to **Marx's** Address.

Marx, however, explained his use of ethical language in a letter to Engels, dated London, November 4, 1864. The Address was not wholly his, but consisted of a reworking of a declaration of principles submitted by a sub-committee of the International, which showed the confused moral sentiments of its members under the influence of **Mazzini** and French socialism. As Marx says, "I was obliged to insert two phrases about 'duty' and 'right' into the preamble, ditto 'truth, morality and justice,' but these are placed in such a way that they can do no harm..."¹⁹ The question is whether his optimism was justified and whether his concessions to the moral point of view had more far reaching consequences than he ever imagined. Marx appears to have had some doubts on this matter. For it was very difficult, he complains to Engels, to arrive at a formulation which would present their theory "in a form acceptable from the present standpoint of the workers' **movement**."²⁰

Unlike Engels, whose discussion of morality in *Anti-Duhring* takes for granted the emergence of a proletarian morality alongside bourgeois morality and the surviving remnants of Christian feudal or Catholic and Protestant moralities, Marx seems to have been critical of all moralities including a socialist one. Engels, too, criticized all past morality as class morality, but he had only kind words for the "**prole-**

tarian morality of the future" and for the "really human morality" that transcends class antagonisms and their legacies in thought.²¹ On the one hand, he was committed to the view that, on the whole, there has been "progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge"; on the other hand, he defended a thorough-going ethical relativism based on self-interest and group egoism.²² In any case, Engels presents an argument for the survival of morality on reformed grounds, presumably in opposition to its withering away. Whereas Marx was unsparing in his criticism of religion, morality and the state, Engels seems to have made a special exception of revolutionary morals. Thus, there is evidence that Marx's critique of morality was somewhat more radical than that of Engels and that his animadversions concerning ideology were directed as much at morality as at religion. If so, it is only in a very ambiguous and misleading use of language that one can speak of Marxist ethics, of the ethical foundations of Marxism and of the Marxist foundations of ethics, not to mention Marxist humanism and Marx's own moral convictions and presumed justification of socialist morality.

It is only later, in *The Housing Question*, that Engels's critique of morality takes a more radical bent. For there he supports Marx's view that revolutionary morality is hardly less mystifying than bourgeois cant concerning what is just and unjust. In criticism of natural law theories, Engels notes that the search for a common denominator of justice in the legal systems of various peoples at different times results only in the most abstract expression of law itself; furthermore, that "this justice is never anything but the ideologized, glorified expression of the existing economic relations, at times from the conservative side, at times from the revolutionary side."²³ Actually, Engels expresses a contempt for all moralities as cognitively meaningless owing to their prescriptive instead of descriptive functions. In his strictures against Proudhon's ethical foundations of socialism and principle of revolutionary justice, he discusses briefly the gulf that separates the normative from the scientific approach to ethics: "A description is one thing and a presumptuous demand is another. . . . We describe . . . economic relationships as they are developing, and we provide the proof. . . that their development is at the same time the development of the elements of social revolution . . . ; Proudhon, on the contrary, demands from present-day society that it shall transform itself not according to the laws of its own economic development, but according to the prescriptions of justice."²⁴

That all morality is ideological is reiterated by Engels in a letter to Conrad Schmidt, dated, London, October 27, 1890. Moral principles are strongest, he notes, in economically backward countries that can still play first fiddle in philosophy. The principles of justice and morality flourish only on the basis of certain prehistoric materials inherited by civilized societies, "of what we should today call bunk."²⁵ Morality has

been predicated upon various false conceptions of nature and of man's own being, upon primitive nonsense that science has been gradually clearing away in the course of its own advancement. One of Engels' chief objections to morality is its ideological character. For the moral person falsely imagines that his principles are independent of a social context, that they are somehow self-justifying, whereas in fact they are economic reflexes of which he is unconscious.²⁶ Ideology, as Engels subsequently defined it, "is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness"; the actual motives impelling him remain unknown to him, and he imagines himself to be motivated by abstract principles instead of by the economic and social conditions that gave rise to them.²⁷ It is noteworthy that in his general indictment of moralities, Engels does not make an exception of the revolutionary ethic of modern socialism. Presumably, it, too, is ideological and, to that extent, a harmful excrescence upon the body of organized labour.

In view of this résumé of the Marxist critique of ethics, we should now be able to expose not only current efforts to discover an ethic in the writings of the young Marx, especially by those hostile to the ideas and entire approach of his later writings, but also the efforts of so-called orthodox Marxists who have laboriously combed these later works for clues to Marx's moral philosophy. Is there, for example, an ethics of the *Communist Manifesto*? Consider for a moment one recent effort endeavouring to establish: (1) that the ethics of the *Manifesto* is simply an expression of the needs, hopes and desires of the modern working class; and (2) that it alone conforms to the necessary and desirable direction of social evolution.²⁸ In support of these theses, we find statements like the following: "Capitalism is bad because the proletariat finds it so from the standpoint of its own class needs and interests"; and "The struggle of the working class for the overthrow of capitalism is justified and right not only because it expresses their needs and interests, hence their ethics, but because their ethics is the highest or best possible at this stage of history."²⁹ The first of these statements correctly stresses the partisanship of Marxism in the class struggle; the second, its historical perspective and appeal for support from other classes. But do normative expressions actually occur in the *Manifesto*? Then why try to import them there? Since they are absent from the text, one may surmise that so-called orthodox Marxists, like their social democratic counterparts, are personally in need of an ethic which they mistakenly read into Marx.³⁰

III

In addition to rejecting the moral point of view, Marx also rejected all ethical theories designed to place ethics upon a scientific footing. Marxism not only has no ethical foundations, but there are no Marxian

foundations of ethics. This does not mean that Marx made no original contribution to ethical theory. On the contrary, his critiques of ethics and of philosophical theories of ethics were predicated upon his own formulation of a materialist-critical sociology.

Let us, then, abandon the search for a philosophical ethic and outline briefly Marx's contribution to ethical theory. Marx's classic work in this area is *The German Ideology*, where it is impossible to distinguish his contribution from that of Engels. Beginning with the life processes of men, their method is designed to show how morality, along with religion, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology, reflects these life processes.⁸¹ Far from having an independent history of their own, the mores and corresponding moral philosophies of different peoples and classes have no development, but are merely the ideological reflexes and echoes of their time. Starting from the material process of production, Marx and Engels believed they could explain the system of social relations connected with it, civil society in its various stages including different political forms, and on this basis further "explain the whole mass of different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc. . . ."⁸²

Ethical theory, in other words, is a social science and not a philosophical one. It is concerned not with providing a scientific basis for normative judgments, but with explaining them scientifically. Not philosophical analysis, not a logical and semantic examination of ethical language, but a sociological and historical investigation of the conditions and role of moral belief is the method recommended for ethical theory. Instead of formally analysing the language of ethics, which never gets beyond theoretical criticism, Marx and Engels chose to expose its conditions. "The real, practical dissolution of these [moral as well as religious] phrases," they wrote, "the removal of these notions from the consciousness of men, will . . . be effected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical deductions."⁸³ Here we have the clue to Marx's and Engels' indifference bordering on hostility to a philosophical analysis of ethical statements: "For the mass of men, i.e. the proletariat, these theoretical notions do not exist, and hence do not require to be dissolved. . . ."⁸⁴

As a scientific enterprise, ethical theory concerns itself with descriptions and explanations of competing moralities, with their origin and development in relation to the economically conditioned needs and interests of particular social classes. The vocabulary of ethics is of interest not as a medium upon which to exercise one's logical acumen and bag of tricks, but as an expression of class interest, the social psychology of different groups, and the particular mode of production. The questions posed by ethical theory include the following. To what extent do the various and inconsistent meanings associated with value terms derive from and designate antagonistic class interests at different stages of social development? Do the etymologies of terms like

"honest," "noble," "virtuous," "servile," "churlish," "villainous," "knavish," "boorish," and so on, tell us anything about their social significance? How does a knowledge of the origins and use of ethical terms contribute to a science of human behaviour? In what respects is the history of philosophical ethics concerned pre-eminently with moral values and moral controversies irrelevant to the problems of ordinary workers? Is there any evidence for the thesis that the dominant moral ideas in any age are the moral ideas of a ruling class? Among the methods required to answer such questions are linguistic analysis, etymological research, and extensive use of the evidence of anthropology, sociology, literary and intellectual history, including the history of philosophical ethics.

By identifying philosophy with the theory of the general laws of thought, nature and society, that is, with formal logic and dialectics, Engels excluded ethical theory from the domain of philosophy.³⁵ The question is whether he did not leave to chance the guidance of human conduct. If ethical theory is a branch of historical sociology, but philosophy excludes an interest in social engineering, then where can we turn for advice concerning practical matters?

In his Introduction to Marx's history of *The Class Struggles* in France, Engels notes that the materialist method in historiography was used to trace political conflicts back to the struggles between social classes and fractions of classes typical of a given stage of economic development, and also "to show the particular political parties as the more or less adequate political expression of these same classes and fractions of classes."³⁶ A careful analysis of Marx's historical writings shows that he deliberately limited his subject matter to the major political crises and struggles of his time directly involving workers, that his central preoccupation was the anatomy of revolution and the strategical and tactical lessons to be culled from the mistakes of the working class. Much the same can be said of Marxist sociology and ethical theory, which were both intended to serve a practical purpose and were instrumental in providing a scientific basis for the strategy and the tactics of the Labour movement.

A major consideration in deciding upon a particular commitment and course of action is whether or not it corresponds to, or is an adequate or faithful expression of, our interests as members of well-defined social classes. Although the amoral world outlook of science is the most fitting and effective one in forwarding the economic and political demands of the modern working class, communist or socialist morality was for Engels a far more adequate servant of Labour's interests than any of the various forms of bourgeois morality. The language of morals, like that of value in economics, does not strip off its mystical veil until the process of material production is organized by freely associated men and is "consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan."³⁷ Since such a condition presupposes

an end of exploitation, one cannot expect the Labour movement to free itself from moral superstition until it has also accomplished its economic and political emancipation. What Marx says of the religious reflex of the actual world may also be said of its moral reflex, which cannot vanish until "the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature."³⁸ Until then, socialist or communist morality will continue to serve as the most adequate or fitting form of morality for the working class, just as Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man in its bourgeois development as Protestantism and Deism will continue to serve as the most fitting form of religion for bourgeois society as a whole.³⁹

A particular commitment or line of action is said to be justified by Engels when it conforms to considerations of prudence or self-interest, to the objective stage of development of the productive forces at any given time as well as to the objective economic interests of individuals as members of particular classes.⁴⁰ It is in this sense that the struggle against exploitation is currently justified for the modern wage-earner, although he can also justify in retrospect past forms of exploitation as necessary conditions of modern socialism.⁴¹ Actually, these forms of exploitation were justified in the past not only for masters but also for their workers, whose very survival depended upon their capacity to produce a surplus. Given the low level of economic development, slave and peasant rebellions were doomed to fail; under the circumstances it was not in the interests of workers to rebel but to resign themselves to their particular lot. Whenever the working population is so completely occupied with necessary labour that it cannot look after the common affairs of society, including legal matters, art and science, so long will there exist a special class freed from actual labour to manage these affairs, and to take advantage of its privileges by imposing an even greater burden upon the working masses.⁴² As Marx says, "the realm of freedom does not commence until the point is passed where labour under the compulsion of necessity and of external utility is required."⁴³ And until that time our freedom lies not in building a moral counterworld to the actual one, but in recognizing the limits imposed upon us by the actual circumstances of scarcity.

There is still another sense in which the concept of justification is relevant to the strategy and tactics of human conduct. As a descriptive instead of a normative concept, it designates for the most part the ruling interests at any given time, in turn justified by the existing level of the productive forces. Here, however, the justified forms of social behaviour may or may not be counsels of prudence for the working class:

The justice of the transactions between the agents of production rests on the fact that these transactions arise as natural consequences from the

conditions of production. The juristic forms... merely express this content. This content is just, whenever it corresponds, and is adequate, to the mode of production. It is unjust, whenever it contradicts that mode. Slavery on the basis of capitalist production is unjust; likewise fraud in the quality of commodities."

Since the ruling morality ceases to be justified for the workers as soon as the level of material civilization promises to support their long wished-for goal of emancipation, there is no paradox in asserting that justice is not self-justifying, but stands in need of justification by an oppressed class.

One difference between the materialist and idealist approaches to human conduct is that the former bases itself upon the economic interests of **individuals**, which are necessary conditions of the full flowering of the personality, while the latter bases itself upon abstract principles, feelings and imaginary projections that provide little more than psychological comfort and the illusion of personal integrity. For those who have made their accommodation to poverty, as for those who have adjusted to physical and mental illness, self-interest consists in preserving the status quo. However, such people are not qualified judges even of their own interests. To judge one's own interests correctly is tantamount to knowing the actual limits of what one can do, and not just the assumed or conventional limits. Although disagreements arise from efforts to moderate conflicting aims and to implement them in the face of concerted opposition, there is much less reason for disagreement by qualified judges concerning the desirability of various forms of economic, social and political advancement over corresponding forms of degradation. As Engels notes in a critique of the humanistic ethics of Feuerbach, the happiness of man depends not upon moral but upon material considerations, especially economic instrumentalities, including the leisure affluence affords for enjoying members of the opposite sex, books, conversation, art, music, outdoor activities, and the like.⁴⁵ In contrast, Feuerbach's humanist ethic "either presupposes that these means and objects of satisfaction are given to every individual as a matter of course, or else it offers only inapplicable good advice and is, therefore, not worth a brass farthing to people who are without these means."⁴⁶ Instead of a moral struggle to rise above the pressures of the social environment, it is far more consonant with self-interest to struggle to bring economic and social conditions into conformity with human needs.

Man, according to Marx, does not exist except as a member of a human group, and his so-called human nature is determined by membership in that group. According to his Theses on Feuerbach, "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual . . . [but] is the ensemble of **the social relations.**"⁴⁷ On the supposition that the mode of production conditions the general character of man's social,

political and cultural activities, it follows that it also determines his character, personality and moral beliefs. Since these are secondary and derivative products of his economic and class situation, it would hardly be consonant with his self-interest to take his present character as fixed. There are other characters or selves that may promote to an even greater extent his interest as a human being. Unlike idealist approaches to practical judgment, which define self-interest exclusively in terms of a man's present character and commitments, a materialist approach assumes that man himself is a project no less than his social and political environments.

Since the moral point of view is fundamentally abstract, we need to replace it by the science of real men in their historical development. Like the juristic world outlook, itself a secularization of the theological outlook, the moral point of view goes beyond the actual facts and scientific theories of human behaviour, which are all we need for guidance in practical matters. Instead of looking at conduct through moralistically coloured glasses, Marx turned to political economy and history for information concerning the *de facto* interests of types of men, on the supposition that psychological characteristics are themselves functions of social and, especially, class differences. Alternative approaches to conduct were, according to Engels, "unsatisfactory to express adequately and embrace completely the working class' desire for emancipation created by economic conditions; . . . only lack of illusions in the heads of the workers could correspond to their lack of property."⁴⁸ Against Proudhon's ethical approach, he argued that the struggle over property is first of all a matter of interests and only secondarily a question of justice.⁴⁹ His own approach was less ambitious in terms of ultimate ideals, but was designed to show that a given stage of economic growth objectively supports the interests of the wage-earners in bringing about a desired change in social conditions. As he wrote in *The Housing Question*: "I am satisfied if I can prove that the production of our modern society is sufficient to provide all its members with enough to eat, and that there are houses enough in existence to provide the working masses for the time being with roomy and healthy accommodation."⁵⁰

Far from being disinterested in its effort to extend the limits of human knowledge, Marx's ethical theory aims at forwarding the intellectual interests and practical needs of the modern Labour movement. Unlike philosophical ethics and the sociology of ethics taught in universities, it poses questions of revolutionary significance. For Engels as well as Marx, it was impossible to combat effectively the cultural forces hostile to organized labour without first understanding the role of moral and religious principles in sanctioning tradition, the circumstances under which workers subscribe to ethical doctrines hostile to their economic interests, and the relevance of ethical language to the ideological waging of the class war. To the descriptive and explanatory

tasks of ethical theory they added the strategical and tactical problems of social engineering. It is the interest in such questions that distinguishes Marx's ethical theory from rival sociologies of ethics. And it is precisely the partisan character of these questions that constitutes his most distinctive **contribution** to ethical theory.

NOTES

1. Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (1962), pp. 92-3.
2. *Zbid.*, pp. 12-13.
3. *Zbid.*, p. 195; see also p. 105.
4. *Zbid.*, p. 104.
5. *Zbid.*
6. *Zbid.*, p. 90.
7. *Zbid.*
8. *Zbid.*
9. *Zbid.*, p. 91.
10. *Zbid.*, pp. 99-104.
11. *Zbid.*, pp. 103-4.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
13. Translated from *Die deutsche Zdeologie* by Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (New York, 1958), p. 317.
14. "The Communist Manifesto," *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, 1959), p. 27.
15. "Critique of the Gotha Programme," Feuer, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.
16. "Address and Provisional Rules of the Working Men's International Association," *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, 2 vols. (New York, 1933), Vol. II, p. 443.
17. *Zbid.*, pp. 441-2.
18. Lenin, "State and Revolution," *Essential Works of Marxism*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (New York, 1961), pp. 172-3; and Khrushchev's report to the XX1st Congress of the Communist Party (U.S.S.R.), *ibid.*, p. 466.
19. *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 606.
20. *Zbid.*
21. *Anti-Duhring* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 130, 132.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *The Housing Question* (New York, n.d.), p. 92.
24. *Zbid.*, pp. 87-8.
25. Feuer, *op. cit.*, p. 405.
26. *Zbid.*, p. 404.
27. Letter to Franz Mehring, London, July 14, 1893, *ibid.*, p. 408.
28. Howard Selsam, "The Ethics of the Communist Manifesto," *A Centenary of Marxism*, ed. S. Bemstein *et al.* (New York, 1948), p. 32.
29. *Zbid.*, pp. 26, 29.
30. For a detailed discussion and criticism of current socialist and social democratic efforts to provide Marxism with a philosophicaletic, see my companion pieces on "Historical Materialism in Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (September 1962), pp. 1-22, and "Socialists in Search of an Ethic," *Studies on the Left* (Winter, 1963), pp. 14-33. There I argue that Marx's ethic was unique in rejecting a philosophical foundation along with normative claims to universality. In view of the present essay, however, I no longer take for granted that Marx had an implicit ethic of his own.
31. Feuer, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
33. *Zbid.*, p. 260.
34. *Zbid.* If this statement were true, Marxism could **afford** to go without the services

of contemporary analytical philosophy. Unfortunately, it happens to be false; the ordinary labourer is as victimized by moral and religious nonsense as are members of other classes.

35. *Anti-Duhring*, pp. 39–40, 194; and *Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York, 1941), p. 59.
36. *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 171.
37. *Capital*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1906–9), Vol. I, p. 92.
38. *Zbid.*
39. *Zbid.*
40. Letter to August Bebel, London, March 18–28, 1875, *Karl Marx: Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 593.
41. *Anti-Duhring*, pp. 249–50.
42. *Zbid.*, p. 251.
43. *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 954.
44. *Zbid.*, p. 399. On the justice and propriety of exploitation under capitalism, see *ibid.*, p. 454.
45. *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 221.
46. *Zbid.*
47. *Feuer*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
48. "Juristic Socialism," *Marx and Engels on Religion* (Moscow, 1957), pp. 269–70.
49. "The Housing Question," *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1958), Vol. I, p. 622.
50. *Zbid.*, p. 632.