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The Moral Legacy of Marxism*

Abstract: Marx would not have anything much to contribute to contemporary discussions of 'normativity', because he would reject various of the assumptions on which they rest. Thus, he does not believe it possible to isolate 'moral normativity' as a distinct object of decontextualised study so as to derive from it rationally grounded imperative to individual action. This does not mean that Marx can provide no orientation for human action, but this has a different nature and structure. Marx suspicions of ethical theories are well founded, but his own productivist assumptions should be revisited.

1. A Legacy?

To speak of the 'legacy' of something is to consider it as being dead, although, of course, one can do this proleptically. A theory is dead if it is no longer entertained and discussed, no longer thought about, and no longer moves anyone to action. To speak of the legacy of Marxism, then, is to consider it as in this sense dead. By calling Marxism a 'theory' I don't mean that it can be summed up in a single general statement such as that peptic ulcers are caused by a bacterial infection (not by stress), that the earth moves about the sun (rather than vice versa) or that bad money drives out good. Individual 'theories' in this sense are, of course, of extreme importance in guiding our action, but they are not the only kinds of structures that are important in our cognitive and practical life. We also use and are dependent on more complicated sets of interconnected concepts, assumptions, methods, directives about how to go about trying to come to an understanding of the world, claims about which things are important and which less important, and so on. Examples of 'large-scale theories' in this sense might be Christianity, liberalism, positivism, *tiers-mondisme*, 'the economic approach to human behaviour',[1] or Marxism. None of these can be easily reduced to a single claim. If one wished one might also call them 'programmes', 'approaches', 'frameworks' or even (if sufficiently general and all-encompassing) 'world-views'. In any case, 'theories' in this wider sense do not usually stand and fall with the confirmation or refutation of any of the individual theoretical items with which

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* I am particularly indebted to Richard Raatzsch for conversations about the topics discussed in this paper.

[1] Becker 1976, one of the sacred texts of the neo-liberals.

they are associated at any particular time. They usually have a sufficiently open texture and are sufficiently robust to be able to accommodate significant changes, even the refutation of some of their original component parts, while maintaining their identity. At one point in time a geocentric views of the universe was an important component of Christianity, but, contrary to the fears and expectations of many thinking Christians of the early modern period, adopting heliocentrism did not actually make that much difference to the hold Christianity continued to exercise on large numbers of people in Europe and its dependencies. Large-scale theories, or world-views, then, are often surprisingly robust.

How, then, does such a 'large-scale theory' die? Putting aside what one might call accidental and exiguous factors, e.g. an epidemic wiping out the population in all the towns where Monophysitism was strong, 'death' can happen for, roughly speaking, two kinds of reasons. First, powerful groups who have vested interests in preventing people from acting on a given large-scale theory may engage in specific acts or adopt policies that attempt to censor, marginalise, suppress, or discredit it, using whatever means the society provides for doing that. Thus, the Catholic Church was able to have Giordano Bruno burned at the stake for holding and propagating views it thought seditious, and many societies have had official governmental censors who decide what may be published, what plays may be produced, and what visual material circulated and displayed. The attempt at marginalisation may, however, be more subtle. Thus, during the Cold War the CIA massively subsidised abstract art, hoping that this would have the effect of making the Soviet doctrine of 'Socialist Realism' seem culturally irrelevant, and thus of reducing the appeal of Marxism. The variety of ploys and strategies that can be adopted along these lines is very large[2] and not all strategies will work equally well, or indeed at all . Thus, it is sometimes claimed that the Nazi exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' in Munich in the 1930s, which was intended to generate massive public disgust, backfired because many who saw it came away *liking* what they saw.

The ability of large organisations with fixed interests to direct public attention and influence public attitudes and beliefs by specific interventions is considerable, but probably not unlimited. If one wishes to understand the death of a large-scale theoretical approach, such intervention will not usually be the whole story. A second factor will be more important. A theory in this sense dies when its general view of the world or some important constituent of it comes to seem deeply implausible or irrelevant to a sufficiently large number of members of the society. Why discuss or even entertain a view that does not at all seem to ring true to our experiences of the world in which we live? Thus, in a society in which public authorities are few, inefficient, deeply corrupt, or simply 'far away' (Небо высоко, Цар далеко) claims that all disputes should (or even could) be settled by 'appeals to the constituted authorities' will seem significantly less plausible

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[2] The Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge now offers a special M.Phil.-programme (funded by banks) for the study of how one can restore public trust in banks. This is a particularly ingenious ploy because how could anyone object to a 'philosophical' study of such eminently important topics as trust, public institutions, debt.

than they will to inhabitants of the densely policed and administered societies of contemporary Western Europe.

The different factors cited above are not mutually exclusive. Part (however, in general only a part) of the reason why certain ways of looking at the world seem natural and commonsensical to people is that institutions operate to reinforce that belief. However, even in that case, it is not always anything like a conscious *policy* that is at work. The really effective reinforcement takes place through action that people and institutions may well engage in 'in good faith'. People believe that 'in society it is dog eat dog' partly because it is something they are told is true—as the existence of the saying itself shows—but partly because in our society this observation seems correct.[3] The operation of our institutions reinforces the view that the world is a place where every man is for himself and the only values are financial values. It isn't that the bankers at Chase or Barclays sit down and intentionally plan to reinforce these beliefs. That would mean that they in some sense really knew that they were false or fragile and needed conscious support, but that, I think, is not always the case: many of the relevant people *actually hold them*. So this is the opposite of a 'conspiracy' theory.

I further note that a legacy is something of continuing relevance, importance or value, but not necessarily of positive value. In many societies I can inherit not only assets, but also debts or obligations, just as I can be said to inherit a genetic malformation, or the legacy of a badly spent youth can be a chronic disease or a vicious disposition. The negative elements of the legacy of Marxism have been canvassed *ad nauseam* and no one is in danger of overlooking them. In the context of this paper, I shall be interested mainly in what we can consider 'positive' elements in a legacy. So to speak of the legacy of Marxism is to consider it as a complex movement which is in some sense over, past, superseded or dead, but which contained elements which deserve to be carried forward and cultivated.

2. A *Moral* Legacy?

But what is a 'moral legacy'? It is particularly tricky to discuss this partly because 'moral' and its derivatives are in general used in such a variety of ways, most of which are not very clear or well-defined even by the standards of terms that apply to human phenomena. In addition, what 'morality' is and how it is to be understood is exactly what is at issue between Marxism and various of its competitors.

I should like to begin by making three distinctions which seem to me useful in discussing the possible moral legacy of Marxism. First, there is a difference between 'morality' considered as a potential quality of certain human *actions*, practices, institutions, and this is to be distinguished from 'morality' as a kind of *thinking* about or theorising about these actions, practices, forms of indi-

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[3] So the mistake people make is to assume that because 'in our society it is dog eat dog, in every possible society it must always be dog eat dog'.

vidual and collective activity, and institutions. So on the one hand, there are
things we recognise as on the whole and usually good practices or good ways of
conducting ourselves and structuring our practices (e.g. diversifying our agricul-
tural production, training doctors and nurses to a high standard, making sure
the system of sewers and drains in our towns and cities are kept in good repair,
regulating the flow of heavy vehicular traffic by formulating clear rules etc.), and
things we recognise as on the whole and usually bad practices or bad ways of
behaving (duelling, public executions, female genital mutilation, filling offices of
real public power with people whose only qualification is heredity). 'Recognise'
here is related to actual behaviour. We 'recognise it as good' means we tend to
promote and cultivate it, praise it, express concern when the practice seems to
be threatened, etc. and analogously for what we 'recognise as bad'. However,
in addition to holding that certain practices may be good or bad as it were 'in
themselves', we often also recognise that there are particularly good and partic-
ularly bad ways of organising and conducting these practices, participating in
them, and integrating them into one another.

Even if there is wide agreement in our societies about these practices and
about which ways of organising them are better and which worse, there may
be significant theoretical disagreement about how to understand the practices,
forms of action, or institutions in question, and about *why* structuring them
in one way rather than another is especially good or bad. So there is 'actu-
ally existing' morality as embodied in recognised practices and ways in which
practices are cultivated, and then there is 'morality' as a theorisation of prac-
tice. For obvious reasons these two won't be completely separate, because for
instance there is usually *some* connection between how people think in general
terms they should act, and how they actually do behave in valuing, pursuing
and avoiding types of activities in their lives. On the other hand, they won't
simply be the same, because people very often don't actually avoid or work to
abolish practices that in some sense their theoretical views suggest ought better
not to exist, they are often deluded about what they actually value, they often
systematically do things they think they ought not to, and they very often don't
hold themselves to very high standards of self-awareness, consistency, etc.[4]

The second distinction is that between 'morality' in a broad sense and 'moral-
ity' in a narrow sense. In the broad sense 'morality' encompasses any kind of
systematic distinction between better and worse in the human world, particu-
larly if 'better and worse' can be connected to human action, i.e. it concerns
morality if it is possible to say (in the widest sense) that you should or ought to
do it, or act in a certain way. Brushing one's teeth in the morning is a question
of morality in the widest sense of that term in that we all 'should' do so; it
is better to do so than not because if we do not, we run the risk of allowing
our teeth to decay. So in this broad sense 'moral' can be thought to contrast
with '(merely) descriptive' (such as the accounts in dental textbooks about the
progress of tooth-decay and gum disease).[5] The narrower sense of 'morality'

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[4] Obviously the discussion in this paragraph is highly compressed and simplified.

[5] To avoid misunderstanding, I should merely note that this is a mere report of the way I
think many people would think. I don't mean to endorse any final distinction between 'moral

is, in the West, one that stands very much more firmly and strongly under the influence of residual Christian or post-Christian conceptions. Here 'moral' is construed as definitely distinct from (if not actually opposed to) the merely prudential, instrumental, or tactical; it is assumed that there is a special 'moral ought' different from the prudential 'ought' of 'You ought not to antagonise that mastiff' (because he is free to attack you) or the instrumental 'ought' one finds in statements like 'You ought to go the right here' (rather than to the left, because the place you want to get to lies in that direction).

'Morally good' is often construed as meaning something like 'good in itself' (in purported contrast to 'good relative to some assumed contingent purposes', such as avoiding a struggle with a dog in order to avoid injury or to get to a certain place quickly). The archetypical case of 'morality' for some is one in which the Christian or Kantian would give advice like the following: 'Although it would be convenient for you, do no harm to others, and even benefit others, still you "ought" not to lie in this situation.' This narrow sense of 'morality', in turn is sometimes connected with a whole further apparatus of ideas about human motivation, choice, intention, guilt, perhaps also conscience and (sometimes) the virtual irrelevance of real consequences to the evaluation of action.

The third distinction is that between making a moral judgment and 'moralising'. To make a moral judgment is to judge that some institution, practice, or course of action is morally valuable and good, or acceptable, or unacceptable (in the wider sense of 'moral'), or that it is permitted or absolutely prohibited by morality (in the more limited sense). To engage in 'moralising' is to make a moral judgment in an inappropriate context, that is to propound it in a context or in a way which seems to ascribe to it too much or the wrong kind of weight or effectiveness. So I am making a moral judgment (in the wider sense) if I say that you ought to brush your teeth in the morning, making a moral judgment in the narrow sense if I say that you ought never, never to tell a lie (regardless of the consequences); I am moralising if I am a criminologist who, when asked to explain the rise of a certain kind of crime in a certain area, replies 'It is because the people who live there are wicked', because even if this were to be true. It is not an appropriate or relevant answer to the question. The headmaster of a school who believes that by preaching to the students that smoking, drinking, taking drugs, and adolescent sexual activity are 'evil in themselves' he will actually effectively prevent the pupils from engaging in any of these activities is 'moralising'. Marx himself gives the example[6] when discussing the views of a certain "Herr Heinzen" who "*glaubt, er hat das* Fürstentum *zu erklären, indem er sich für seinen Gegener erklärt* [...]. [Er hat] *die Entstehung des Fürstentums vermittelst moralischer Gemeinplätze begründet*." However, you do not give an explanation of the origin (and function) of an institution by declaring that you disapprove of it on moral grounds. Similarly to state that the Jacobins were '*Unmenschen*', to use another one of Marx's examples, is not to make a con-

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in the broad sense' and 'descriptive'; this distinction actually seems to me a subordinate one that is contextual and depends on point of view.

[6] Karl Marx, '*Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritisierende Moral*', in: *Deutsche Brüsseler Zeitung* 28. & 31. October, 11., 18., 25. November 1847 (in MEW vol. 4., 331ff.).

tribution to the understanding of the French Revolution. This is 'moralising' because moral judgments are inappropriate/irrelevant/pointless in the context of looking for an explanation.

Obviously there are any number of different kinds of 'moralising behaviour' depending on the various different ways in which something can be inappropriate, or irrelevant, or the various different ways in which a person might, tacitly or explicitly, give 'too much' weight to the enunciation of a statement about the morality or immorality of some institution, action, or person. Obviously, too, to say that I am giving 'too much' weight to making statements with a moral content is not to say that making such statements has *no weight or influence at all*, much less to say that such statements would not have any weight at all in any context.

So clearly, I can reject 'moralising' without in any way being committed to, for instance, the falsity or vacuousness of all moral theories, and without thinking that moral judgments are always useless, or 'ungrounded'. Similarly, I can reject 'morality' in the narrow sense in that I can think there is no separate and distinctive moral 'ought' and yet still engage in a wide range of everyday discussions about what it would be good, better, bad, or worse to do, how the government 'should' address certain problems, how you 'ought' to behave toward your colleagues, your cat, your children etc. Finally I may continue to behave as most people do, evaluating things in my environment, including using what may look to be morally-loaded terms, without actually endorsing any of the various theories that have been proposed about the status of such terms.

Thus one might say that the following was part of the moral legacy of Marxism: as a result of participating in various activities which took the specific form they did only because those who organised and participated in them were committed to some of the characteristic theses of Marxism, certain social classes acquired habits of solidarity which they had not had before and would otherwise not have been likely to acquire in such a highly developed form; this solidarity, one might argue, deserves to continue to be cultivated and perhaps expanded. This development was a legacy in the form of a change in actual recognition of some ways of acting *as being* good, and perhaps also of others (scabbing) as being bad. Furthermore, one might think that a healthy suspicion of moralising was one of the positive legacies of Marxism. Since, however, the focus of this paper is academic I'll concentrate on ways in which Marxism conceptualised 'morality' (in the widest sense).

Marxism is thought to have died because it seemed to have been given a quasi-experimental run (the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, and Eastern Europe) and to have failed (see also Geuss 2014, 45–67). 'Failure' for 'large-scale theories' of type to which Marxism belongs, is itself an interpretative category. Sometimes when experiments fail there is simply a general sense of disorientation and confusion, but given theoretical positions, as has already been suggested, need not be completely abandoned just because they fail in one of their concrete incarnations. The perceived failure of Soviet-style economies to provide what they promised (greater economic growth than capitalist economies) and the way in which vested interests in capitalist countries played up these failures in Soviet-

style systems, were important factors in the demise of Marxism. However, it is usually easier for people to give something up if they think they have some potentially viable alternative they can adopt, and at the end of the 1980s there was an alternative that had come to seem more plausible than Marxism. This is the Western combination of political liberalism with a capitalist economy that is just sufficiently controlled to avoid, at least up to the present, an utterly lethal crisis (although not to avoid crises altogether). Was there then a way of presenting a political philosophy appropriate to Western forms of capitalist democracy, ideally one that would easily integrate the political and the ethical? Best of all, because people were not so stupid as to believe that these Western societies were flawless, would be a view that encouraged minor reformist activity while overwhelmingly endorsing the basic socio-economic framework. This would allow its adherents to bask in a warm and comforting glow of self-righteousness while remaining firmly within the limits set for the self-reproduction of the basic economic framework, and indeed strengthening this framework.

3. One Popular Liberal Alternative

Toward the end of the 1970s John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* began to establish itself as a point of reference for political philosophy. The reasons for this were many and varied, some of them having to do with the content of the theory he presented, others with his way of going about presenting and arguing for his views.[7] Thus, although his original view is a position on political philosophy, its connection with a (certain kind of) Kantianism in ethics is also clear. Also many of the assumptions Rawls made were ones that were widely shared by members of his target audience in the US, assumptions such as those about the centrality of the individual moral subject in thinking about politics and society. As the theory was developed over the years, revised, reformulated and extended (Rawls 1993), this Kantian perspective with its focus on the moral powers of individuals became even more prominent. These 'powers' were considered to be not historical acquisitions whose form and activities were shaped by the particular historically specific society in which they occurred and which possessed varying degrees of importance in different contexts and different societies, but as historically invariant and fundamental; their exercise was tacitly assumed to be always more important than all else.

Many of the conclusions Rawls came to were also familiar and unthreatening to the inhabitants of Western-style 'liberal democracies': society needed to be reformed in various ways, primarily some ways having to do with the distribution of goods, services, and other benefits, but fundamentally it could be considered to be in order. 'Reform', of course, has always been with us, and, as Leopardi showed, even those who wish things to stay the same can be intelligent enough to see that they can only remain the same if they change (di Lampedusa 1962, 33). So calls for reform, as I mentioned above, can be comforting. Rawls fit into this model: No revolution was needed to install a godly elite which would

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[7] Thus, the book is eminently suitable for use as a set text in university courses.

subject a recalcitrant population to divine discipline, no abolition of all forms of government, no prohibition on extraction of surplus-value through wage-labour, no reintroduction of slavery or child labour, no compulsory military mobilisation for all 18 year olds, male and female, in the interests of the higher purposes of the state or religious or ethnic group.

In addition to this, Rawls' highly abstract way of going about political philosophy was deeply reassuring. The message was clear: no need to engage in complicated, sticky, ambiguous interpretations of historical institutions (e.g. slavery) or events (the extermination of indigenous populations), no need to know anything about *other* societies, cultures, polities and their values, beliefs, practices—just see if they are 'reasonable' by our standards, and that can be done in a decontextualised way. No need to think about the actual social origins, function or consequences of concepts, theories or belief systems: that is irrelevant to evaluating them. So the historian, the anthropologist and the sociologist have nothing to say in political philosophy; it is a matter just for the philosopher (and perhaps, because of the centrality of claims about 'distribution', for the economist). The philosopher is to look for a form of 'reasonableness' (and a corresponding 'unreasonableness') in a set of basic principles that govern institutions and these principles are to be easily detachable from all the mess of real history and real politics. When they are thus detached, they are to be evaluated by our 'ethical intuitions', as normalised, perhaps, by the application of some simple universal principles of reason and empirical experience. No wonder academic economists loved Rawls from the start.

For present purposes the most important aspect of the kind of political philosophy that Rawls made popular is the role played by antecedent normative evaluation of institutional principles: because of the centrality assigned to our moral evaluations, it has come to be called the 'normative turn'. Methodologically Rawls' work and that of those who followed him represented a counterrevolution, jumping backwards over about a century of political and social thought to reconnect with the late 18$^{\text{th}}$ century, and particularly with Kant. Crudely speaking, during the period between Kant and Rawls social and political philosophers were not as obsessed with the purity and distinctiveness of the 'normative', and keen on separating it as clearly as possible from the empirical, historical, sociological, the useful, etc. as Kantians would have them be. Furthermore, they did not in general make a point of proceeding by *starting* with a normative theory of a 'good', praiseworthy, 'reasonable', ideal, or 'just' society and then in a second step moving on to try to 'apply' this theory to the world as it is. The questions of where and how one starts and of the order in which one proceeds are not irrelevant in political and social philosophy any more than they are in actual politics.

Marx represents in a particularly striking way a completely different approach to defining the issues and proceeding. He was deeply committed to a way of seeing which is very different from the Kantian or the Rawlsian way. One does not start with 'the individual and his moral powers', any more than from 'the individual and his cognitive powers'. Lukács in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußt-sein* (Lukács 1968, esp. 58ff.) got it right when he said that the most important

thing about Marx is his view that society is a 'totality'—that is, it is a entity composed of individuals-in-historically-specific-social-relations, which is oriented toward satisfying historically arising needs and reproducing itself though social action. Lukács adds that one could reject every single claim the historical Marx made, including presumably the labour theory of value, the analysis of primitive accumulation, the laws about the falling rate of profit, the various claims about the role of the proletariat in history, etc., and still be an 'orthodox' Marxist, provided one thought it was necessary to approach society using the right 'method'—and to use the right method was to construe society as a totality (in the above specified sense).

To reject the 'abstract' individual starting point is not to deny that there are individuals, to assert that they and their claims are unimportant, or even necessarily to deny that they have the powers the Kantian ascribes to them (at least to some extent and in some contexts). It is to deny a certain foundation status that is attributed to abstract and isolated individuals. Equally one might well reject the claim that ethics should start from 'man is a strawberry-eating animal' and that this provides a fundamental criterion for the evaluation of human institutions and actions. One can reject this view, while allowing that it might be a perfectly good starting point for reflections about human society by someone in the soft-fruit business. Rejecting the status of the general claim need not imply denying that strawberries existed, that men, women, and children occasionally ate them, and that for some people this was an important and relevant fact.

Marx, of course, thinks that individuals do have any number of cognitive powers in the sense that if you take an individual who has grown up in a functioning society, you can theoretically isolate that individual and try to investigate what he or she can or could do. Marx himself puts emphasis on the ability of humans to execute plans, which they have elaborated in their imagination before acting.[8] This does not, of course, mean that the powers thus discovered, and which it is perfectly proper *in one sense* to 'locate' in the individual, are not also inherently social in their origin and in their nature. It makes sense if you enter a room to say that she (over there) speaks French, whereas he (over here) speaks Russian, and they (over in the corner) each speak Turkish—it is correct that each has a different power and ability, although what you are doing is merely, as it were, distributing possible social roles to individuals (the role of Russian-speaker, French-speaker etc.). It is also true that you can get some idea of the grammar, syntax, lexis of Turkish by investigating what this individual Turkish speaker says, what he or she recognises as comprehensible Turkish. None of this is false, but it does not follow from this that Turkish (or any language) is not also and 'inherently' a social phenomenon which can be fully understood only as a way in which different speakers interact with each other.

Language, and hence thought of any degree of sophistication, exists only as a collective social practice activated by individuals. It is true that English would

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[8] MEW 23, 90ff. Robinson, of course, grew up in England and has corresponding powers and abilities, which cannot be understood apart from that formation. Also MEW 23, 192–5 about the spiders and bees in competition with the human architect.

not exist if there had never been individual speakers who made use of it. But it is also true that the language pre-exists any individual speaker; every speaker finds it always already there. It extends beyond the grasp of any individual speaker at any given time—there are English words I do not know and do not use, although I could acquire them—and, in most cases, the language will continue to exist after I cease to speak it; indeed after I cease to exist. There is, however, no royal path either from universal structures of rationality or from my individual consciousness or action to language as a social phenomenon—a point which Herder and Hegel saw clearly, which Kant signally failed to grasp with catastrophic consequences for his philosophical views, and which the late Wittgenstein rediscovered in the 1930s and 40s. It is for this reason that neither psychology nor the study of the proposition can be philosophically fundamental for Marx.

For Marx, it is a mistake to start[9] with abstract individuals because individuals always grow up as members of a social group and can't be understood independently of that fact. This does not mean that individuals are 'nothing more than' undifferentiated social units or that they can be 'reduced' to their social context. To say that society is to be *treated as* a historical totality is not to say that any given theory we may have of it at any particular time is infallible, or actually objectively exhaustive. When Marx speaks of 'society as a totality' he is *not* endorsing the existence of what has now come to be called a 'view from nowhere'.[10] To make this mistake is, in some sense, to drop back to the position of Hegel, who thought that in his philosophy, absolute knowledge was realised: history and system came to coincide, so that his view was at the same time the comprehensible result of human history and a fully self-grasping way in which the absolute realised itself. Individuals as members of human groups have perceptual and ratiocinative powers, but these are not infallible or without historical location, and as a result their views are always perspectival. Marx agrees with Nietzsche that there is no disembodied, absolute knowledge; wherever there is 'knowledge' it is a knowledge located in some human individuals or groups (including institutional groups). To say that society 'is a totality' is to say that someone (individual or group) must so consider it. Such a person or persons will never be seeing it from 'no point of view at all' (or from 'God's eye view', or from the purported standpoint of 'pure reason').

I can see my own views as a part of 'our' views, and as an expression of a general way of looking at the world characteristic of someone living in Southeast Britain at the beginning of the 21st century and as integrated into our forms of

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[9] The whole notion of the 'starting point' was an obsession for Hegel and philosophers who came after him, including Marx. Marx has a highly complex discussion of his method, where to begin, how to proceed etc. Suffice it here to say that he agreed with Hegel that there isn't any 'absolute' starting point, because there are no such thing as 'foundations' in the traditional sense, but that he also distinguished clearly between the method one should use for doing research (the '*Forschungsmethode*' with its appropriate starting point) and the method one should use when, at the end of one's research one had the conclusions, no matter how tentative they were, and wished to present them in the best form (the '*Darstellungsmethode*' with its appropriate starting point).

[10] Title of a book by Tom Nagel (1989).

social reproduction in various ways. Even if I am on some issues individually deviant, I am not deluded enough or self-centred enough to overlook the ways in which I have no more jumped over my own shadow than any else has, and my views, attitudes, and desires are (one variant of) those of my time and place, and they will be found to be reflected in what I (and others) take to be 'society in itself totality'. This reflective knowledge changes the way I think and act in various ways, but need not utterly undermine my use of our available moral language. I may still make judgments; I just fail to make certain claims about these judgments and the status they have, and fail to regiment my moral judgments according to one or another of the philosophical projects which claims on the basis, for instance, of 'reason alone', or 'reasonableness' or considerations of 'reflective equilibrium', to be able to 'justify' the priority of one set of them over others. I know that important parts of this language will come to be historically superseded, but don't know which parts, in what way, and what (if anything) will replace them. So their potential historical variability would be an argument against using them only if I assumed that there was some other non-variable vocabulary and set of concepts and theses to which I might have access and which would be 'better' for me to use. We have good reason to think, though, that this assumption is unwarranted. Society, as one might put it, is a totality open-to, open-for, and open-in *praxis*.

4.Totality

This approach via 'totality' means, then, that the human individual, his or her perceptions, values, 'intuitions', situation are neither the absolute starting point, nor the absolute ending point of thinking about the human good to the extent to which it is attainable through action. In particular I need to call into question my own intuitions, perceptions, and forms of valuation by reflecting on their origin, the context in which they arose historically, the way in which I acquired them, who is benefitted and who disadvantaged by looking at the world in this way. The only way to conduct this reflection is through the study of society as a whole and its history, and this is best done as a member of a group; in some sense it can only ever be done as a member of a group, because even an interior monologue is a discussion conducted in a natural language which is an inherently social medium. This is not to deny that sometimes I find myself as an individual in an emergency situation which looks to me like the one the Kantian takes to be paradigmatic—in which I must perhaps act immediately and do not have the luxury of reflecting in common with others and forming my beliefs carefully. Such cases are, however, precisely emergencies.

Post-Christian moral philosophy commonly has three characteristics. *First* of all, it (at least tacitly) presupposes the priority of the first-person individual perspective and the relation of that individual to a specific action. So it tries paradigmatically to answer the question: 'What ought I to do here?' *Second*, it assumes (with an optimism which originates perhaps in the view that the Christian God is the omnipotent Creator of the whole world) that there is a morally

acceptable action that can be performed in all circumstances. *Third*, it assumes that 'ethics' is a fully autonomous philosophical discipline with conclusive results that can be expressed in some kind of 'doctrine': the injunctions (and/or prohibitions) it provides are certain, fully grounded and universally valid; they give me a full, definitive warrant for acting. A philosopher, by virtue of his or her special training, can consult the doctrine and on that basis provide guidance for action and orientation in the world.

Kierkegaard brings out the first feature of traditional ethics in the course of arguing against Hegel (Kierkegaard 1992). One can take Kierkegaard as arguing roughly that Hegel assures me that monogamous marriage is part of the structure of a fully rational society, but this does not answer the real question, which is: 'Should I, Sören Kierkegaard, marry Regina Olsen?' In trying to frame the question in this way, is Kierkegaard being profound or narcissistic? Hegel, and following him Marx, would have denied that Kierkegaard's tiny problem had the kind of philosophical priority Kierkegaard wished to attribute to it. This does not mean that Kierkegaard's question and his problem do not exist, that there is nothing anyone could say to him to help him—he may have experienced friends, wise colleagues, a sympathetic pastor (or imam), a concerned uncle or godfather who can give him what turns out to be excellent advice. It is not even the case that there is nothing helpful that a philosopher—by virtue of having the kind of training philosophers have customarily had in Europe in the past two hundred years—could say to him.

Many philosophers[11] were not merely highly intelligent, but also strikingly charismatic figures, and perhaps their specific study of philosophy contributed in various ways to making them good at giving advice. However, to say that a philosopher can also sometimes help with practical advice, and that his training has something to do with this, is not to say that the *way* he helps is by consulting his doctrine, nor that the legitimate question of how Mr. SK (or 'anyone in SK's situation') should act in this situation is the central one in practical philosophy. Why shouldn't 'What shall *we* do?' take priority? And who then exactly is 'we'? The people who live, like me, on Tenison Road; my neighbours in the Petersfield ward of Cambridge; other retired university lecturers in the UK; other supporters of the UK's membership in the EU; *alle Betroffenen* (is this a very well-defined category?); all rational agents (why should they be of *special* interest to me and do they include my cat?).

Even in the philosophical tradition itself there are more than merely traces of approaches that do not give priority to the first-person perspective. If the question is 'τίνα τρόπον χρὴ ζην', [(in) what way is it necessary to live],[12] '*Quid agendum?*' Or for that matter Lenin's 'Что делать?' [Also usually rendered '*What is to be done?*'], these are all in an impersonal form (and the first refers to a whole mode of life rather than any specific action). The relation in which any of these questions, or the answer to any of these questions, stands to something that 'ought to be done' by *this* specific human agent, is not direct.

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[11] Like my own teacher, Sidney Morgenbesser.
[12] Plato, *Republic*, 352D6–7

To look at the world of human practice systematically from the Christian (and Kantian) point of view, or to start from this question and give it universal priority, is to distort ethical and political thinking significantly, and Marx rejects this distortion. This does not, of course, imply that one 'must' or 'ought' always to give priority to the collective or a more impersonal perspective, rather than my own individual one. Nor does it imply that there is a universal 'view from nowhere' which we can adopt. It is perfectly consistent to deny that the 'I'-perspective always has systematic priority without asserting that I 'may' never 'permissibly' suit myself.

To move, then, to the second of the three characteristics, some of the problems of individuals have no moral solution. If I am a slave in first century BC Rome, should I love or hate my master? It isn't clear what it would mean to say that either answer to this question is morally the right one. Of course, this question only arises in a society in which the institution of slavery exists; abolish slavery and the question disappears. This does not mean, either, that we can say that the slave in first century Rome 'ought' to struggle to abolish slavery. This would be a pointless thing to try to do. Marx holds that it is just as useless to tell a slave in a society at a low level of development of the forces of production that he ought to 'struggle for the abolition of slavery' as it is to tell him he ought to jump over the moon, because Marx thinks that whether or not slavery can be abolished at any given time and in any place depends on factors massively outside the control of any individual or indeed any organised group. It is perhaps not an accident, but rather something that is grist for Marx's mill, that as far as we can tell *no* slave in the ancient world, not even Spartacus, proposed to abolish slavery. This never occurred to *any* them as a possibility (as far as we know) and if it had, it would have been an empty thought such as 'What would I do if I could (now, i.e. c. 150BC) fly' or 'How about if my goats could do the cooking around the hut for me?' None of the above means that it might not be good in our society to oppose the continued existence of slavery or its reintroduction, or indeed to impose this (should circumstances permit) on other contemporary societies who do not already accept it.

This does not mean that it is never under any circumstances possible to 'abstract' some part of the whole, and study or even teach that by itself—without this possibility human cognition would be impossible. This abstraction is possible and harmless, *provided* you don't falsely think that by undertaking it, you isolate some special property, 'the normative', which can be the object of a distinct, self-contained and fully autonomous discipline, and have thus grounded an ethics which speaks with complete authority to people about how they 'must' always act.

To be more exact, if I try to 'abstract' the normative[13] in my society, I shall generally end up with a highly complex system of principles, habits, and modes

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[13] What one might call the 'North American' school of Hegel-interpretation fails because it makes no attempt to formulate and interpret one of Hegel's basic claims, namely that the descriptive and the normative (to put it in a vocabulary Hegel himself would not have used) are not, finally, distinct. It is fully understandable that interpreters would shy away from this claim because it does seem simply preposterous.

of behaviour. Roughly speaking, this system will have two parts:[14] one will contain a set (or various sets) of rules, principles, maxims and values which will be those which people will publicly profess, with more or less prompting, as describing how their lives 'ought' to be organised, or which philosophers can formulate in 'rational reconstructions' and get people to affirm. I'll call this the 'high morality' or the '*Überbau*'-morality of the society. The other part will be the 'really existing' morality which will be what people actually live by. In one characteristic configuration, the 'high morality' will be absolutist—'one must absolutely never lie'—but the really existing form will interpret, qualify, and bend these absolutist principles, introduce exceptions, and singularities: 'One must never lie, but equally one may not betray a confidence, so when these two principles conflict, it is permissible to be 'economical with the truth'' (or the older: 'One must never lie except to protect a lady's honour'). The reason for the discrepancy between the two—'high' and 'really existing' morality—that will be given by people in the society is that the 'high morality' is literally unliveable: Perhaps the occasional saint or hero may make a stab at really living according to its precepts, but no one can expect everyone to be a hero.[15]

So when I, as a theorist, try to abstract in such a way as to formulate the rules of morality in effect in my society, I will in the best of cases end up with an unwieldy, lop-sided and tension and contradiction-ridden two-part structure. If I have done my job correctly, most agents in my society will at least recognise my reconstruction for what it is (*modulo* a certain amount of the usual kind of human cantankerousness and counter-suggestibility). They might, of course, nevertheless have *different* attitudes toward it. Some might think the 'high morality' was based on a set of direct Divine Commands (or the injunctions of a substitute for God, such as reason); others might have other theories about that. The more enlightened will be likely to think that 'the rules of morality' look very much like a set of principles that prescribe what *in general* we need to do for society to maintain itself in existence: a society in which murder, deceit, and envy ('coveting') were really uncontrolled would be unlikely, one might think, to be able to maintain itself in existence for long.

For Marx, the Divine Command view is palpably false, but when 'enlightened' people say 'morality is necessary for society to maintain itself' this statement is too ambiguous to be straightforwardly either true or false. By 'morality' do they mean 'high morality', 'really existing morality', or their particular two-part structural amalgam of both? Does 'society can maintain itself' mean '*our present society*'? How is this to be individuated exactly? Or does it mean '*any human society*'? Or 'any human society above a certain level of complexity'? (What level?) If enlightened people mean by 'morality is necessary for society to maintain itself' that our 'really existing habits of moral action' are necessary for *the kind of society we now inhabit* to maintain itself, that is perhaps slightly exaggerated, in that it suggests that our actually existing habits are strictly the *only* ones compatible with this form of society, and that is probably not correct. Of course, there is, and always will be, room for small variations and

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[14] See below, 67f.

[15] And, as Brecht has his Galileo say, 'Woe to the land that needs heroes'.

even for reforms. Japanese ethical dispositions and habits in the 1970s were not exactly the same as those in Italy, West Germany (as it then was), or the US. Nevertheless, these societies were, according to the Marxist analysis, all instances of the 'same' socio-economic formation, which some Marxists at the time called 'late capitalism'. The exaggeration, however, contained an important grain of insight in that it put the focus on the role which really existing morality played in fostering and facilitating the reproduction of our specific type of society.[16] This, Marx holds, is a society essentially divided into classes, and its really existing morality is a '*Klassenmoral*' much of the actual content of which has the function of maintaining these class divisions and furthering the interests of those who have control over capital. One can assume that Marx would have a certain sympathy with the claim that the reason for the discrepancy between the '*Überbau*'-morality and the really existing morality had something to do with the 'unlivability' of the former (under existing economic conditions).[17]

Proponents of the enlightened view, however, tend to confuse the true claim that our actually existing morality contributes to helping *this* kind of society to reproduce itself, with one or the other of two completely different views, both of which Marx thinks are clearly false. The first of these incorrect views claims that our actually existing morality would be needed (or, would contribute) to the maintenance of *any* human society (perhaps, any 'at a sufficiently high level of organisation'). The second mistaken view is that that our '*Überbau*'-morality would be appropriate for *any* society (either 'appropriate as a "high morality"' or even, amazingly, 'realisable and appropriate as a "really existing morality"'). For Marx, however, the 'high morality' is essentially a compensatory fantasy generated by, and responsive to, the failings of the social formation in which it arises. As such, it is a deeply distorted expression of human aspirations at a particular time and place; one cannot simply lift it from that context and expect to get anything determinate which could function as a really existing morality in any society. Furthermore, these high moralities derive their binding power precisely from the particular social dissatisfactions or characteristic forms of misery that generate them, and if those dissatisfactions are abolished, the components of the high morality lose their relevance, or change their status and function in unpredictable ways. Perhaps some of the content of the *Überbau* can be reinterpreted, but then the process of reinterpretation will not be any kind of routine transposition, but will actually provide most of the significant concrete content.

To be sure, we can survey human societies and by a process of abstraction and generalisation discover and formulate some general rules and principles that (in one form or another) are endorsed by members of most human societies—don't kill without provocation, be kind to children. However, these will be what Marx calls '*Gemeinplätze*' (see also Trotsky in Trotsky/Dewey 1973, 21–2). They will

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[16] Marx could also hardly fail to wish to point out that even if a morality of this type was useful in helping a social formation like ours to maintain itself, it was not sufficient, and it would be a gross error to think one could succeed in allowing this society to maintain itself *merely* by continuing to cultivate the same kind of habits.

[17] A constant theme in Brecht, cf. '*An die Nachgeborenen*' (Brecht 1981, 722ff.).

be not especially profound and foundational, but particularly shallow and, as it were 'sub-alethic'—too indeterminate actually to have any truth value on their own, and certainly too unspecific to be a guide to any real human life. What does 'without provocation' actually mean? What does 'kind' mean?[18]

So there seem to be three results of this discussion. *First*, in order to understand anything about the morality of any society, we need to be able to give the kind of ideological account I have just given of the role forms of morality play in social reproduction. *Second*, if we understand that society is a totality and that anything we might say about 'morality' will be the result of a complex process of abstraction or of a series of such processes, we will realise that the traditional conception of an 'ethical theory' which can be free, self-standing, cognitively autonomous, and yet give determinate, authoritative, fully well-grounded advice on how to live, is fundamentally mistaken. *Third*, none of the above means that, apart from the usual fallibility of all human judgment, there is any *special* problem with the use of evaluative language. The absence of a separate and completely distinct realm of the 'normative' which is object of study in ethics, in no way means we can't say it is better to drink this glass of clean water than that glass of effluents from downstream of the huge petrochemical complex, or that we would be better advised to support the development of solar power than to permit fracking, or finally that Mr. Walter Palmer, the Minnesota dentist, ought not to have been permitted to shoot Cecil, the lion, with his bow and arrow, and also that whatever the technicalities of the law, he 'ought' not to have shot him. The fact that none of these can be connected to any set of absolute, invariant, general prohibitions, injunctions, principles or values, is a problem if we think such principles exist, or could exist, as foundations for 'ethics', but not if we do not make that assumption.

5. Is There Then No Morality?

If one wishes to put it this way, one can say that Marx have a substantive theory of 'morality', although one with a very different structure from those usually discussed in philosophy seminars. People are not Cartesian *res cogitantes* or Kantian rational agents, but rather they live in social groups and have complex desires and needs and the power (and disposition) to be active in such a way as to satisfy these desires and needs.[19] In this context they develop sets of social rules to govern their interactions with each other: these we call forms or systems of 'morality'. The needs which humans have include not only a need to be able to transform the environment in certain ways, for example by making water in a river drinkable, by building shelters for protection from the rain and cold (if appropriate), or by acquiring and preparing substances that can be used as

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[18] I recall once reading the memoires of a clown who expressed his deep gratitude to his father, also a clown, who had taken him out into the woods one day and at one point had intentionally broken both his legs, on the grounds that his successor in the family profession needed to have an irregular and ludic walk if he was to be successful.

[19] On the concept of 'need', see Wiggins 'Claims of Need' in Wiggins 1998; also Heller 1974, and my Geuss 2012. Also Heller/Féher/Márkus 1983 and Hamilton 2003.

food, but also and equally importantly needs for sociability, that is for having certain emotionally shaded relations with other members of the group (including relations of intimacy, mutual concern and affirmation, positive dependency and a large number of other things). Furthermore, and this is a point Marx emphasises again and again, the needs are not static but are *constantly changing* because the process of satisfying our needs (in one way rather than another because they can usually be satisfied in more than one way) is at the same time the process of generating *new* needs. People can satisfy their hunger (depending on circumstances) by hunting, fishing, collecting nuts and berries, herding reindeer, camels, goats, sheep or cattle, cultivating rice, manioc, potatoes, wheat or other foodstuffs. If people cultivate rice to satisfy their hunger they eventually acquire/ generate a need for something like chop sticks; if they bake bread, they can use their hands to eat; if they eat porridge they may come to need spoons; if they hunt with a net as individuals, they will probably eventually also need a knife to clean the game they catch; if they hunt with nets in a group, they will need enhanced cooperative skills; fishermen may come to need boats. Which particular historical path the development of needs, of ways of satisfying them, and of thereby generating new ones will take is to some extent dependent on the micro-environment in question.

What social rules we develop depends on the needs, desires and beliefs which we have. The basic mistake of his opponents, Marx often says, and never stops repeating, is to think that current arrangements are not just a passing historical phase, but are 'eternal' (*ewig*)[20] and that the concepts suitable for describing current arrangements have eternal application and validity. Perhaps the period during which they were useful and relevant seems 'long' by the life-span of an individual human—six hundred years or so for feudalism—but still historically it is a transitory moment. Nietzsche says about philosophers that their original sin—he eirenically calls it their 'idiosyncrasy'—is their 'Egyptianism', their denial of history and refusal to accept that even 'categories' or concepts of 'reason' are transient (Nietzsche 1980, 74): they have a historical origin, develop over time, and eventually lose their identity, become invalid and irrelevant, and pass away. Marx would agree (although he would put more emphasis on the 'Egyptianism' of economists).

There isn't anything 'invariant and universal' about any set of needs or any way of trying to satisfy them. Or rather, one can *say* there is an invariant structure here—'human groups socially transform and control nature to satisfy their interests; their 'morality' is part of this process'—but this is a completely empty statement, useless for traditional ethics because there is no path from it to any kind of universal injunction or decision procedure for any individual. To know that my local morality is part of the process of the self-reproduction of society, or even that it is a strictly necessary part of the process of self-reproduction, does not tell me what to do. Kierkegaard was right about that.

Moral systems are an integral part of the social structure, but nothing excludes my judging that, on the whole, any given society does not deserve to survive, that it would, on the whole, not be good for it to reproduce itself (Turnbull

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[20] This point is made repeatedly in *Die Heilige Familie* (MEW vol 2).

1972, 280). I can make this judgment even about my own society. If I do make
it, that shall be on the basis of various other considerations, to be sure, and none
of them will be apodictic, categorical, or infallible. Also, even if I judge that it
would be a good thing for my society to reproduce itself, it does not follow that
I must think I have to give priority to satisfying its needs over following my own
desires. Whether or not this is the case depends on the circumstances, and there
is no final absolute framework—not even that of 'human needs'—to which one
can refer which will make it unnecessary to consult the circumstances. After all,
it is a *'Gemeinplatz'* that people wish to live, and that to live they must eat,
but it does not follow from that that hunger-strikes are impossible or 'immoral'
or *always* a bad idea. As Montaigne (1979, 275–328), Kierkegaard (1992) and
Dostojevski (2006) all try to argue, it isn't even necessary that I be consistent.

'Need' then cannot play anything like the same role in Marx that, for instance,
'reason' does in Kant and many other traditional philosophers. For Kant one
can discover what one ought to do (or at any rate what one ought not to do) by
consulting reason, which is the same essentially for everyone in all societies at all
times, and will give everyone in every society and time the same advice. For Marx
no one can 'consult universal needs', because although in one sense it is possible
to affirm some simply empirical generalisation such as that all humans 'need'
to eat, the purported 'universal need to eat' has cognitive content only when
its specific historical form is specified, and people can in some circumstances
decide to starve themselves to death for perfectly understandable reasons that
we have no way of disqualifying *a priori* as 'foolish', 'useless', 'self-defeating' or
'immoral'. Despite the absolutely central role of 'needs' in human life, you can
no more strictly delimit and 'close' off a purported 'ethical' domain by reference
to an absolute conception of 'needs' than you can in any other way.

One might wonder whether the above account, whatever its coherency and
force against Christian and Kantian style views of *ethics*, was at all relevant to
the 'normative turn' in political philosophy. If the whole project of isolating and
studying 'the normative' doesn't make sense, then it seems odd that political
philosophy should be expected to turn to and orient itself on what would then
be the 'non-discipline' of normative ethics.

To be sure, to return to my three points about post-Christian ethics above it
does not seem obviously the case that Rawls gives special priority to first-person
questions about what individuals should do, although he does give great weight
to individuals' moral powers. However, starting from our own 'moral intuitions'
and imposing the veil of ignorance means that there will be no possibility of
serious ideological criticism; it will not be possible to mobilise historical and so-
ciological knowledge to criticise these initial beliefs. The 'reflective equilibrium'
eventually attained, then, will just be a version of our own original prejudices
write large and surrounded by a normative halo. Finally, if one does give up the
clear intention of the early work, which was to give a theory with the traditional
Kantian kind claiming normative authority based on universal reason, and if one
represents Rawls' position, as he comes close to doing himself in the later work,
merely as just an expression of the world-view of Rawls' 'fellow-citizens' in the
US, the scope of the theory contracts more considerably than I think Rawlsians

would be willing to admit. The actual success of the Rawlsian counter-revolution means, however, that it would be a mistake to underestimate the rhetorical attractiveness of appeals to 'moral intuitions' and 'fair distribution' (as against, for instance, a theory a of human needs and their multiform modes of satisfaction), even for people who seem to have little to gain from it and much to lose.

I said at the beginning of this essay that I would concentrate on what seemed to me to be positive aspects of the legacy of Marx. These included an emphasis on the historical and concrete nature of claims about what was good and what people should or ought or must do, a rejection of moralisation, the idea that society was to be seen as a totality (without assuming that this implied the existence of a 'view from nowhere'), and the theory about 'abstraction', its virtues and limits. In conclusion I would like just to mention one important negative aspect: the emphasis on ever-increasing industrial production. Action to satisfy human needs is tacitly assumed by Marx to *require* ever expanding production. If we are to survive as a species, however, we will have to break with this obsessive pursuit of cancerous forms of exploitation of nature. Presumably, we might be able to detach human activity directed at satisfying needs as much as possible from the cycle of ever expanded industrial production, especially since we do not actually need significant further expansion of industrial activity to give a reduced human population a highly attractive life. How such a detachment might be possible, and what exact form it could take, is anyone's guess. Perhaps the way forward is the cultivation of human needs for increased and increasingly sophisticated forms of sociability and of self- expression that do not require increased material production. This clearly won't be possible under capitalist conditions, which is just to say—what is news to no one except the especially benighted—that although our future is unsure if we rid ourselves of capitalism, it is only too sure that without radical change in our present economic arrangements our prospects are bleak indeed.

> *Wem angesichts der Vergiftung unserer Erde*
> *nichts einfällt als die Frage nach dem Bruttosozialprodukt*
> *Dem habe ich nichts zu sagen.*[21]

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