

# **Marx's Moral Theory and Historical Materialism**

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The well-known paradox between Marxism and morality is that on the one hand, Marx claims that morality as a form of ideology should be abandoned, while on the other hand, Marx makes quite a few moral judgments in his writings. It is in the research after Marx's death that the paradox is found, explored and solved.

The intellectual history of interpreting Marx's moral theory is full of changes and controversies. We are confused by Marx with his multitudinous works which make a mess of research on him. And we can't find some normative moral theories raised in Marx's writings, like those in Immanuel Kant's writings. Moreover, the situation of the international workers' movements was extremely complicated and changeable in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Both Marx's followers and his opponents have searched for something useful to support their own viewpoints from the writings of Marx. Diverse interpretations make the research on Marx's moral theory richer and more colorful, meanwhile, more intricate and puzzling.

By exploring the intellectual history of interpreting Marx's moral theory, I hope to find out the answer to the following questions: whether Marx is a moral philosopher; if so, what his moral philosophy is. I divide the history of interpreting Marx in moral philosophy into three "successive" phases and get my own answers to the aforementioned questions. More importantly, I find that with the development of research on Marx's contribution to historical materialism, a way of solving the

so-called Marx's moral paradox is getting clearer.

1

The 1890s saw the beginning of the first phase in interpreting Marx's moral philosophy. It ended with Marxism being changed into Marxism-Leninism by Stalin in 1938. In this phase, people regarded historical materialism merely as a set of scientific principles or impersonal doctrines. Accordingly, it is concluded that there is no moral element in Marx's thought.

Edward Bernstein's evaluation on Marxism is this: (1) historical materialism is a set of scientific principles, which is in fact economic determinism. Within such a framework, the individual human being loses its position in values; (2) Marx refuses the appeal to morality in his thought, objecting to deducing socialism from ethical principles. Therefore, Bernstein propounds a scheme to revise Marxism. He believes that, a Kantian humanist theory is good to socialism, namely, he renews Marxism by applying Kant's *categorical imperative* to the sphere of political economy.

Karl Kautsky maintains that historical materialism is only related to necessity. As a self-sufficient doctrine, Marxism has no need to be extended to ethics. That is to say, the moral aim of scientific socialism is changed into an economic one and for the first time the moral ideal (viz. the abolition of class), is recognized as a necessary result of the economic development in the history of world. Therefore, Kautsky sees Marx as a completely non-moralist, or even an anti-moralist because of his abolition of morality in communist society.

We now can come to the conclusion that in the first phase: both the revisionists and the orthodox Marxists regarded historical materialism as an economic doctrine, and there was no moral element in the thought of Marx, no matter how different their solutions were (the former hoped to add Kantian ethics to Marxism, while the latter thought that there was no need to do so at all).

2

The following 30 years after 1938 saw the second phase of research on Marx's moral philosophy. With some of Marx's early works being published, it can be seen that Marx did show his mind to morality in his early years. Thus, the debate on Marx's moral philosophy was polarized by two schools, the Marxist humanists and the scientific Marxists. On the one hand, the Marxist humanists, such as Erich Fromm and Eugene Kamenka, place greater emphasis on ethical rather than social-theoretical problems of Marxism. Most of them believe that Marx has moral philosophy, despite their disagreement on forms and origins of this moral philosophy. They prefer to applaud Marx's early ideas, especially those in the *EPM*, and deem his later writings retrogressive and non-humanist.

On the other hand, the scientific Marxists such as Galvano della Volpe and Louis Althusser, insist that historical materialism is the true progress that Marx makes comparing to the other masters before him, such as Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach. Members of the scientific school pay more attention to Marx's later writings and remark that his early thought is immature and unreliable.

It can be found that each of the two schools interpret Marx from a single dimension,

with the opinions like poles asunder: on the one hand, members of the humanist school believe that what Marx expected is to criticize the unhuman conditions men suffered under the capitalist society from a philosophical viewpoint. Hence, they see the *EPM* as the truly philosophical writing of Marx and the *GI* in their eyes is only a book on the science of social history. On the other hand, insisting that Marx's theoretical foundation should be dialectical materialism, members of the scientific school prefer to focus on the *GI*, though what they read in the book is only of scientific content.

The fundamental reason for the controversies between the scientific Marxists and Marxist humanists is that they share different concepts of philosophy. For the former group, philosophy is a science in the highest level, analyzing the concepts and methods of specific sciences with the tools of formal logic. Marxism is read in a more scientific way with all of its coarse, unacceptable elements being eliminated and its content being able to reconcile with science, so that it is in agreement with both common sense and the methodological requirements of contemporary epistemology.

However, for members of the humanist school, philosophy deals above all with man and human action. They pay more attention to Marx's theory of human nature in his early works, because it is in these works, especially in the *EPM* that Marx elaborates the process of human nature's alienation in capitalist society and its recurrence in communist society.

Hence, the two schools could accept only part of Marx's thought. Both of the schools admit that Marx is a partly moral philosopher: that is, the young Marx is a

moralist. What they differ is that the Marxist humanists insist showing preference for Marx as a moralist, while the scientific Marxists appreciate Marx's scientific spirit expressed in his later writings.

3

Since the mid of 1970s, research on Marx's moral philosophy entered the third phase and took on a multi-polar appearance. Some analytic Marxists started to do research on analysis and clarification of Marx concerning practical problems such as theories of institutions, class relationship, exploitation and economic crisis. Correspondingly, some topics were raised and discussed by the analytic Marxists and their opponents with regard to Marxian ethics and its foundation, especially to the relation of Marxian historical materialism and moral philosophy.

G.A.Cohen who is famous for his defense for historical materialism with a functional explanation argues that the development of the productive forces is always in conformity with the development of human capacity both in practice and in Marx's theory: the improvement of the productive forces is just the rise of man's working capacity. With this recognition, people would accept that Marx's emphasis on technological development (viz. the "productive forces" of society) is not to disparage humanity but to highlight Man's own development. Especially, Cohen cherishes the idea that with the full development of the productive forces in the communist society, the free activity of individual would reach an unheard-of level. Cohen's functional interpretation creates a new path in understanding the content of historical materialism from which we see that the productive forces are not an independent

power outmatching human beings any more, but their development involves the activity of men as rational beings to improve their situation and satisfy their wants.

George Brenkert proclaims directly that Marx's moral theory is part of his scientific views, that is, historical materialism is Marx's meta-ethics. Brenkert reconstructs the foundation of historical materialism. He argues that in Marx's theory, the productive forces are not separated from the productive relations, and both of them are united in the modes of production. He recomposes the content of the modes of production. Labor capacity is one of the most important elements in the productive power and includes skill, training, expertise and experience, scientific and technical knowledge. Brenkert also adds morality and values to the list, because he insists that one's moral structure and valuable judgments function in his work as well as the scientific knowledge and training that he prepares for the work do. Thus, the moral element, as one of the components in the modes of production, is changed from social consciousness into social being.

Obviously, the relationship of historical materialism and morality is not the research motif of Cohen, and Brenkert's reinterpretation on historical materialism somewhat departs from Marx's original aim. However, there is a valuable turning point in this period, that is, some scholars realize that it is important to get the ethical foundation of Marxian philosophy from historical materialism.

Here comes a conclusion on the exploration of the intellectual history in interpreting Marx's moral theory after him that, Marx's moral paradox is a dominant character in the research of Marx's moral philosophy. In the first phase, the paradox

was neglected because it played a trivial role in Marxism. In the second phase, the basic mode of Marx's moral paradox was disclosed, which was about the contradictory standpoints between humanism in the *EPM* and materialism in the *GI*. In the third phase, the content of Marx's moral paradox was enriched, which entailed the antinomy between the theory of human essence and historical materialism, the conflict between moral condemnation of class exploitation and morality being abjured as an ideology, and the collision between morality in class society and the so-called Communist morality. Anyone who is about to solve Marx's moral paradox has to get a media to reconcile the aforementioned contradiction.

#### 4 A Possible Solution to Marx's Moral Paradox

Chinese scholars have made great achievement in Marxist philosophy since 1978. After a serious reconsideration on the Marxist textbook which was originated in the former Soviet Union, Chinese philosophers began to understand Marxist philosophy with the key of historical materialism. They reach a consensus that the neo-materialism that Marx set up was just historical materialism.

With such an intellectual background, I believe that Marx founded a new set of philosophical principles in the *GI* with the theory of historical materialism. There is definitely a shift between the *EPM* and the *GI*, but neither in the sense of methodological break as Della Volpe points out, nor in the sense of epistemological break as Althusser argues. It is a shift on understanding the relationship of humanism and materialism from the perspective of German Idealism to Marx's own materialism.

In the *EPM*, Marx still steps on the level of "the old philosophy", explaining the history of society from the theory of human essence. While in the *GI*, Marx began to explain the human essence and the phenomena of alienation from the basis of social history.

It is the theory of historical materialism which achieves such a shift. It is both a scientific viewpoint on social history and a philosophical viewpoint that helps us to change the world and think about ourselves from a different angle.

When criticizing the ideologically bourgeois philosophy, Marx has full confidence in his neo-materialism as a higher scientific theory. Marx discovers and expounds the law of development of history first, taking his recognition of history into a scientific level. However, in order to insure that this scientific law is tenable, Marx has to answer the questions from two related aspects:

(1) Why the development of history functions in such a way (2) Why the law of social development, which involves the activity of human beings with their intentions, is objective.

Marx sees *the production of material life* as the basis of social history in his scientific interpretation. In order to explain why the production of material life is necessary to men, Marx has to find something prior to it. What Marx gets is "the existence of living human individuals". In Marx's eye, it is the first premise of all human existence and all history. On this premise, Marx develops a new conception of history, which is a philosophical foundation for his materialistic interpretation of social history. I shall explicate the premise of historical materialism under two main

areas:

First, the premise that "Men must be in a position to live" is the final cause of social history from a philosophical aspect. Marx changes his idea on the real distinction between men and animal: it is not "consciousness, religion or anything else you like", but the production for men's means of subsistence. Marx believes that men are conditioned by their physical organization, and thus have to work with tools in order to live. The necessity of human labor is, therefore, deduced from a prerequisite both in theory and in practice, viz. Men must be in a position to live. From this premise, Marx establishes a material basis for human history, because "by producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life" .

Second, Marx's premise is also an axiological and humanistic principle in understanding men themselves, which is in opposition to the abstract conception of human nature. In this aspect, Marx achieves a revolutionary change from the German philosophy. He starts to explain the human nature and its historicity from the basis of social history, in other words, from the subsistence of human beings, not vice versa.

In German philosophy, (1) *the essence of man* is presupposed as an existing thing, a supreme thing; (2) human activity and enjoyment are determined by human essence. Marx criticizes that what the German Philosophers do is to "create an ideal of man and put it into the heads of other people".

Unlike the German philosophers, Marx proposes a reversed relation: it is the activity of men which determines their nature. Men in nature are to satisfy their subsistent needs: it is the first and most important value for them, because the

existence of men is the biological premise for men as subjects who make valuable judgments. (2) Marx insists that the development of consciousness should be merely reflections and echoes of men's real life-process, and that it is the material life which determines consciousness, not vice versa. (3) Since on the one hand, different generations are left under different circumstances by their predecessors, and on the other, men have different needs to meet their existence in different times, the character of human nature is not abstract and fixed but determined by the actual life of men. The content of human nature changes while its basis changed. Meanwhile, justice, equality and other concepts concerned with humanistic content as the products of human activity are not permanent either, but rather change with the development of men's modes of production.

By means of interpreting men, nature and the relation of men and nature in terms of the basis of all the human history, Marx solves the contradiction between materialism and humanism, and presents us a humanistic foundation in the heart of his philosophy. I need to specify that humanism in Marx's idea is no longer in the sense of the classical German philosophy. Actually it is a neo-humanistic idea. Humanism here does not focus on the eternal and universal character of human nature any more. Accordingly, the concepts of justice, equality and liberty etc. which derive from such human nature lose their sense as long-standing principles. What Marx cares about is a humanistic outlook concerning much about man and his subsistent condition in the social life. Every form of society has its own criterion on humanism. What is unchanged is that any humanistic criterion should not violate men's interests of

existence. Therefore, Marx's humanistic idea is new because it is combined with his materialistic conception of history. The contribution that Marx makes to moral philosophy is that he opens the way of understanding the essential nature of man from the basis of human history, instead of interpreting the social history from abstract human nature.

By reflecting on the history of research on Marx's moral philosophy, we find two roads: one is that Marx's moral philosophy is getting recognized more and more; the other is that the function of historical materialism in Marx's thought is being highlighted more and more. When the two roads come across with each other, we get the way to solve the puzzle between Marxism and morality.