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"MARXIST ANTI-MORALISM":
A CRITIQUE

Having to this point described and analyzed Marx's moral views in considerable detail, I shall in the next four chapters consider some supposed incompatibilities between Marxism and morality. The issues involved here are primarily of a metaethical nature, and it is through the use of recent and contemporary metaethical theory that I hope to solve (or dissolve) these purported difficulties and thus show Marxism and morality to be compatible. Chapter 5 takes up the objection that morality is irrelevant because, according to Marxist theory, socialist revolution is inevitable. Chapter 6 discusses the objection that morality, on the Marxist view, is a form of ideology and is thus, in some sense, illegitimate. Chapter 7 focuses on the objection that morality is relative to social classes and/or historical epochs and, therefore, the task of grounding the Marxist's normative political positions in an "objectively valid" moral theory is hopeless.

The purpose of the present chapter is somewhat more general: namely, to consider a number of objections to the claim that Marx's thought, and thus Marxism, has a moral component. The objection I want to consider is not that the (supposed) moral component is not explicit but that Marx's thought contains neither an explicit nor an implicit moral component. Although this claim may seem absurd, given all of the evidence to the contrary, this depends to a large degree on one's definition of "morality." As we shall see, the more sophisticated versions of this claim do not maintain that Marx lacks a normative theory or form of practical reasoning but only that this theory or form of practical reasoning cannot be classified as moral.

In the first section of the present chapter, however, I shall consider the more radical position—seemingly put forward by such thinkers as Werner Sombart, Donald Clark Hodges, and Louis
Althusser—that Marx's thought has no normative component whatever. This position is normally coupled with the claim that Marxism is purely scientific, but the only way contemporary theorists such as Althusser can make this claim with any semblance of plausibility is by the sleight-of-hand maneuver of giving a stipulative definition of "Marxism." If this definition is not being given, the only interesting question that remains is how this thesis could have come to be put forward seriously in the first place. In chapter 6 I shall argue that various misconceptions of morality to be found in Marx's work have at least aided and abetted this view.

In the second section of the present chapter I take up another objection to the thesis that Marxism has a moral component: the objection that though Marx has a normative perspective or form of practical reasoning, it is not moral in nature. This thesis has recently been defended by Allen W. Wood and Richard W. Miller. According to Wood, Marx's normative views fail to be moral views on two grounds. First, they have as their basis only nonmoral goods (such as pleasure, happiness, freedom, or the realization of human capacities) as opposed to moral goods (such as "virtue, right, justice, and the fulfillment of duty"). Second, they are not connected with our "love of virtue" and "sense of guilt." Both Miller and Wood also argue that Marxism cannot contain moral views because moral judgments and principles must be impartial, and the judgments of Marxists are simply not impartial between classes. But I shall argue that Wood is wrong in attributing only concern for nonmoral goods to Marx since Marx harbors notions of human dignity and autonomy and is seemingly committed to constraints on how nonmoral goods should be distributed. More importantly, I shall argue that the Wood-Miller critique is based on a misunderstanding of impartiality in moral contexts and on an excessively personalistic and Kantian conception of morality.

In the third section of the present chapter I criticize the version of "Marx's anti-moralism" based on a Marxist interpretation of the Freudian or psychoanalytic conception of morality, in which morality is a system of dominance and oppression and thus a reactionary form of ideology: a debilitating disease with which the workers' movement ought not be infected. This, I shall argue, is a one-sided view of morality and, as such, does not defeat the possibility of Marxism incorporating a set of moral views or even adopting an explicit moral theory. Proponents of this view—e.g., Lewis Feuer as well as Anthony Skillen and Andrew Collier of the Radical Philosophy group in Great Britain—tend to claim that Marx's theory of practical reasoning is based purely on considerations of self-interest. Thus I also take up the claim that although Marx's thought has a normative component, the judgments and principles constituting it are based wholly on considerations of the rational self-interest of individuals and, thus, it is not a moral component. Since it is clear from Marx's writings that his normative component or theory of practical reasoning is based on considerations of human goods and harms in general rather than on egoistic considerations of the rational self-interest of individuals, I shall attempt to show where Skillen and Collier go wrong when they assert the opposite.

In the final section I briefly consider the implications of the ethical egoist interpretation of Marx for class struggle and revolutionary motivation. If this interpretation were correct, there would be a serious prisoner's dilemma or free-rider problem, which would block concerted action on part of the proletariat. But I shall argue that this is not correct, and so no insoluble problems arise in this respect. This is because (1) persons engaged in the class struggle often act on moral grounds as well as on the basis of self-interest, and (2) revolutionary struggle will not always be judged unreasonable by individuals who act on the basis of moral considerations as well as self-interest. Therefore, revolutionary struggle will not always be judged unreasonable or irrational even by those who risk more personal losses than gains by entering into it.

Morality and the Scientific Status of Marxism

Let us first consider the claim that Marxism has no normative theory or form of practical reasoning. This position was seemingly expressed by Werner Sombart when he wrote: "Marxism is distinguished from all other socialist systems by its anti-ethical tendency. In all of Marxism from beginning to end, there is not a grain of ethics, and consequently, no more of an ethical judgment than an ethical postulate."1 As Robert Tucker notes in commenting on this passage, "The underlying assumption was that 'scientific socialism' as its name suggests . . . was essentially a scientific system of thought. The moral content of Marxism . . . was thought to be nil."2

This view—which was quite influential in the late nineteenth

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2 Ibid.
and early twentieth centuries—has its origin in statements by Marx and Engels: “The communists do not preach morality at all” and “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.” The roots of this view can also be found in Marx’s objection (in 1875) to the introduction into the Gotha Program of “obsolete verbal rubbish . . . ideological nonsense about right and other trash so common among the democrats and French Socialists.”

More potential evidence of Marx and Engels’ “anti-ethical tendency” consists of their response to the bourgeois objection to communism (as presented by them in the “Communist Manifesto”): “There are . . . eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis.” Instead of attempting to refute this objection and save a place for morality in their system, Marx and Engels merely respond that “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.” Thus they seem to reject morality in general rather than only bourgeois morality or moral theories in particular.

Although one might object that the above-quoted passages could be interpreted as constituting only a rejection of moral theory rather than normative theory generally, it seems to be the case that such passages at least aided and abetted the latter view. The position that there is not a “grain of ethics” in Marx’s writings or thought usually goes hand in hand with the view that Marxism is purely scientific, that is, the view that not only is Marxism scientific but that it is nothing but scientific theory. Both doctrines were, in fact, key pillars of Scientific Socialism, the orthodox school of Marxism developed in the last part of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. Besides being generally a child of its times—when scientism was ascendant—Scientific Socialism re-

5 Ibid., pp. 351–352.

ceived support from Marx’s seeming commitment to the inevitability of the socialist revolution, as well as from the thesis that the revolution would come about largely or even entirely as a result of proletarians acting in their own self-interest. Both doctrines, in turn, received encouragement and support from Marx’s collapse theory of capitalism, which holds that the capitalist system was bound to shatter eventually due to an incredible depression or else wind down and come to a standstill due to the falling rate of profit and the consequent unwillingness of capitalists to make the investments necessary to keep the economy going (more on this in chapter 5). Thus Marx’s thought undeniably has elements that tend toward a purely scientific, “anti-ethical” approach.

The assertion that Marxism is purely scientific—or, better yet, purely descriptive and explanatory—is, however, to be distinguished from the more limited claim that Marxism is scientific. The latter claim merely asserts that the descriptive-explanatory component of Marx’s worldview is scientific. The former asserts that the descriptive-explanatory component is scientific, and that it is the only component of his worldview. In other words, Marx’s worldview contains no evaluative, normative, or—more specifically—moral assertions or claims. The thesis that Marxism is scientific—while itself debatable—is at least plausible. The claim that Marxism is purely scientific or descriptive-explanatory in nature is so implausible in view of Marx’s writings that one wonders how it could have developed and makes one suspect that its proponents have either given scant attention to Marx’s writings—and those of later Marxists—or that, through some confusion or other, they simply do not recognize a moral claim when they see one. Let us examine some of the arguments offered to support the view that Marxism is devoid of moral or normative content, a thesis I shall refer to as that of Marx’s anti-moralism.

Sometimes the assertion that Marxism is purely scientific (or descriptive-explanatory) seems to rest on the Hegelian or quasi-Hegelian thesis that there is no real or tenable distinction between fact and value. The thought here is that if factual and evaluative judgments are not separable, then Marx’s descriptions (and explanations) of various social arrangements already contain his evaluative judgments which are said, by others, to depend upon discernible and separable normative or, more specifically, moral claims and principles.

But here we must distinguish “practically separable” from “logically separable.” Although, as Max Weber and others point out, it
may be exceedingly difficult and in some cases even impossible (as a matter of practice) to separate the factual or descriptive-explanatory elements of a theory or worldview from its evaluative or normative elements, it seems always logically possible to distinguish these elements. As R. M. Hare has shown, even in the case of words that (normally) have both descriptive and evaluative meaning or force, it seems always possible to distinguish the one from the other. If—as shall be assumed for purposes of this work—no evaluative conclusions can be derived from strictly descriptive premises, then a worldview that contains normative political positions must have both descriptive and evaluative components.

In other cases, the thesis that Marxism is purely scientific and, as such, devoid of normative content rests on a stipulative definition of Marxism. Louis Althusser seems to take this tack. He claims, for example, that "ethics ... is in its essence ideology" and also that Marxism admits of no ideological elements. This would seem to entail that Marxism contains no ethical or normative elements, something that—on the common understanding of the term—is simply not the case. However, what Althusser is really claiming, upon closer analysis, is not that Marxism, as commonly understood, is lacking in normative content but that Marxist theory or, more specifically, Marxist empirical, social-scientific theory is lacking in normative content. But this is a rather noncontroversial and uninteresting claim—especially since Althusser does not deny that the workers' movement (and thus the practical activity of Marxists) relies upon and is motivated by a set of normative principles or commitments. Having distinguished between humanism as the early Marx's theoretical framework and as the normative framework of the workers' movement, Althusser claims that "it is possible to define humanism's status, and reject its theoretical pretensions, while recognizing its practical function as an ideology." Therefore, Althusser asserts, "The corollary of theoretical Marxist anti-humanism is the recognition and knowledge of humanism itself as an ideology."10

Thus Althusser's claim that Marxism is value-free even though the workers' movement is inextricably wed to a set of (humanistic) normative or moral views—which is partially constitutive of the "ideology" of the workers' movement—is of little significance because it depends on an artificial separation of the descriptive-explanatory and normative components of Marx's thought and upon a stipulative definition of Marxism as only a body of descriptive-explanatory theories. The point is that if we take Marxism to refer to Marx's worldview as a whole rather than only to its descriptive-explanatory component, then it is not purely scientific. Even if its descriptive-explanatory component is scientific—an assertion that is itself in need of explication and defense—it does not consist solely of such descriptive-explanatory theses and theories but contains something more besides: namely, a set of normative principles or claims.

Perhaps reflecting upon the term "Marxist" will bring this point home. To correctly describe someone as a Marxist is to do more than ascribe certain empirical theories or beliefs to that person: it is also to ascribe to him or her certain values. No one will be regarded as a Marxist who does not condemn capitalism and endorse socialism and (if it should be necessary) socialist revolution, even if he or she accepts all of Marx's empirical theory. Consider the case of a thoroughly reactionary (and cynical) member of the capitalist class who accepts all of Marx's empirical theory—including the inevitability of socialist revolution—but, nevertheless, applies all of his wealth, power, and ability toward forestalling the revolution in hopes that it will not take place within his lifetime or that of his children. Would we even be tempted to call this person a Marxist? Of course not! Even believing that the dissolution of capitalism and development of socialism is absolutely inevitable does not require one to endorse or commend this sequence of historical events, though, in these circumstances, it might be irrational to claim that things ought to happen differently since it is normally thought, as Hume put it, that "ought" implies "can."

But that such an astute thinker as the non-Marxist, late nineteenth-century sociologist Werner Sombart could have reached the conclusion that Marxism is devoid of normative content is surprising, even in light of the fact that he and other writers of this period did not have access to most of Marx's early works. Even in his later, fully mature works (such as Capital) there is ample evidence that Marx is not merely describing and explaining social phenomena but is commending and condemning various social arrangements and prescribing courses of action in line with these commendations and condemnations. Even though Marx—as Henry David Aiken puts it—"formally ... disdained morality and professed to speak only in realistic and in scientific terms [and] only

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about class interests and historical events,” one has only to glance at such sections of *Capital* as “Machinery and Modern Industry,” “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation,” and “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation” — where Marx employs such terms as “misery,” “agony,” “slavery,” “ignorance,” and “degradation” to describe and condemn the condition of the working class under capitalism — to ascertain that he makes normative and indeed moral judgments.

Nevertheless, there are those who even today continue to insist that Marxism is devoid of morality or of any normative content whatever. Donald Clark Hodges, for example, in a well-known article entitled “Historical Materialism in Ethics,” published in 1962, claims that “few Marxist philosophers have accepted [Marx’s] full implications for the study of ethics.” He goes on to castigate those Marxist philosophers interested in developing and defending a Marxist moral theory for “their efforts to resurrect the dead dog of normative ethics.” Since Hodges’ defense of the thesis of Marx’s anti-moralism is one of the most trenchant to be found in recent and contemporary philosophical literature, we will do well to examine it in more detail. Hodges offers the following defense of this thesis:

Although one of the theses of historical materialism is the futurity of ethical controversy about right and justice, many Marxist philosophers continue to affirm the possibility of a normative science. . . . Their researches are blighted by: (1) a normative conception of ethics — the conviction that normative judgments can be true or false, whereas at best they have a scientific foundation without themselves being scientific; (2) the lack of a sociological theory and a dynamic approach to ethical studies that does not wag a philosophical tail; (3) an irra-

11 Aiken, “Morality and Ideology,” p. 150.
13 Ibid., p. 5.
14 Although “Historical Materialism in Ethics” is not Hodges’ last word on the topic, I will concentrate on this particular article because the positions he takes and the arguments he offers therein are paradigmatic of contemporary Marxists who wish to uphold and defend the thesis of Marx’s Anti-Moralism. See also Hodges’ “Socialists in Search of an Ethic,” *Socialists on the Left*, 1963; “Marxist Ethics and Ethica. Theory,” *Socialist Register* (1964); “Marx’s Contribution to Humanism,” *Science and Society*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Spring 1965); “The Value Judgment in Capitalist,” *Science and Society*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Summer 1965); “Moral Progress from Philosophy to Technology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Mar. 1968); “The Economic Basis of Marx’s Humanism,” and *Dialogues on the Philosophy of Marxism* (John Somerville and Howard Parsons, eds.).

16 Ibid., p. 18.
17 Ibid., p. 19.
Setting aside the issue of whether any sense can be made of the claim that ultimate normative ends are "means of living," let us concentrate on his claim that the only sort of justification any ethical (or normative?) standard can achieve is a purely strategic one. If we interpret Hodges as asserting that this applies to all normative standards or principles whatever—rather than to only moral standards and principles—then this line of argument is either question-begging or circular: strategies are only intelligible as devices for achieving given ends and directives to pursue given ends are norms; thus "strategic" justifications of norms are themselves normative. If, on the other hand, we interpret Hodges as claiming that it is only the justifications of specifically moral or ethical standards and principles that are strategic in nature, then we can give a more plausible interpretation of his position, namely, that ethical standards are justified if, and only if, they constitute sound strategies for pursuing nonmoral (e.g., prudential) ends. According to this interpretation, the ends which the "science of social control" directs us to pursue constitute a normative but not a moral framework because the reasons given for the ends to be pursued are prudential rather than moral. (This is, in fact, precisely what is claimed by such philosophers as Feuer, Skillen, and Collier, whose views we shall consider presently.)

Although it is not clear whether or not Marx would have agreed with the thesis that ultimate normative ends can be deduced from "the science of social control"—whatever this is supposed to be—it is clear that if he had, he would have been open to the charge of indulging in a particularly gross form of the naturalistic fallacy. What is clear, however, is that Marx was no Machiavellian with respect to the ends—or even the means—of politics. Although he did not put much stock in using moral discourse to achieve the end of replacing capitalism with socialism and thus greatly improving the human condition, one of the values to which he is especially committed, as we have seen, is that of freedom (as self-determination) and the connected ideal of persons as autonomous choosers of ends—a value and ideal that would seem to be at odds with what Hodges writes here. This defense of Marx's Anti-moralism is, therefore, not convincing. It repeats many of the mistakes Marx made about the nature of ethics, most of which, I believe, can be attributed to the underdeveloped state of ethical and metaethical theory in the nineteenth century. More importantly, there is nothing in these arguments to prove Marxism and morality incompatible.

Moral and Nonmoral Evaluation in Marx: A Critique of Wood and Miller

Although they offer various caveats, Allen Wood and Richard Miller put forward other arguments for the thesis that Marx's worldview lacks a moral component. One argument expressed by both of them concerns the supposed facts that morality must be impartial and that Marx and Marxists are not impartial about the interests of different classes. Before we consider this argument, however, we shall first consider Wood's argument based on the distinction between moral and nonmoral goods. However, since both Wood and Miller admit that Marx has normative views aimed at the promotion of such goods as freedom, human community, and self-realization, the dispute between Wood and Miller, on the one hand, and those—such as myself—who wish to argue that Marx held moral views, on the other, may seem to be much ado about nothing. Although there is more than a little truth to this claim, both Wood and Miller are adamant in their views, which—rather than settling for "Marx's Anti-moralism"—they label "Marxist Immoralism." Furthermore, it is clear from reading their works that this is not merely an abstract point concerning the interpretation of Marx's texts but, rather, a position they believe Marxists and the entire workers' movement ought to accept.

Wood, for example, chides "self-styled Marxist Humanism" as well as those Marxists who consider themselves "champions of justice." In his article "Marx's Immoralism," he writes: "The unquestioned assumption that the highest values simply must be moral ones, is indefensible, misguided, and unhealthy." "Morality...is necessarily ideological in the characteristically persjorative Marxian sense of that term" and "morality may be an enemy of the human race, a subverter of our self-understanding and an obstacle to the fulfillment of our long-term best interests." Finally, Wood admonishes those "who want to burden Marx with moralistic fantasies which (as we know from the texts) would certainly have disgusted him."
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Miller, somewhat less polemically, writes:

What is important is that Marx attacks pervasive philosophical assumptions about morality, that his attack separates him much further from typical moral philosophers than they are separated one from another, and that his consequent outlook on basic social choices in unexpectedly close to outlooks that we would all be inclined to call non-moral. 24

... my main interest is to present plausible arguments for a radical departure from the moral point of view, at least as philosophers have conceived it. When its foundations are brought to light, Marx's rejection of morality as the basis for social and political choice turns out to be complex, well-argued, and humane, though, in an important sense, anti-humanitarian. 25

Given the fact that these two intelligent, well-informed, and well-intentioned philosophers claim that Marx completely rejects morality and urge us to do the same, it is important that we examine their arguments—even if, in the final analysis, the dispute turns out to be primarily a verbal one.

Let us first consider Wood's main argument. While he doesn't go so far as to claim that Marx's practical reasoning is purely "naturalistic" and "self-interested" (i.e., prudential), Wood does claim that Marx's normative views are based wholly on considerations of nonmoral good and evil and, therefore, fail to be moral views. "Marx," according to Wood, "believes that judgments about the nonmoral good of men and women can be based on actual, objective (though historically conditioned and variable) potentialities, needs, and interests of human beings." 26 Wood goes on to argue that the "common idea" that Marx's views on alienation and self-realization constitute the "moral foundations" of Marxism is simply wrong. There are no "moral foundations" of Marxism.

We may doubt whether Marx's views about alienation and self-realization are fundamental moral views. But it is also questionable whether these are moral views. No doubt there is a sense in which any far-reaching views about human well-being count as "moral" views, and in this sense I would not deny that Marx's conception of self-realization is a "moral" conception. But there is a narrower and I think more proper sense of "moral" in which we distinguish moral goods and evils from nonmoral ones. 27

Explicating this distinction, Wood claims:

We all know the difference between valuing or doing something because conscience or "moral law" tells us we "ought" to, and valuing or doing something because it satisfies our needs, our wants or our conceptions of what is good for us (or for someone else whose welfare we want to promote—desires for nonmoral goods are not necessarily selfish desires). This difference roughly marks off "moral" from "nonmoral" goods and evils as I mean to use those terms here. Moral goods include such things as virtue, right, justice, the fulfillment of duty, and the possession of morally meritorious qualities of character. Nonmoral goods, on the other hand, include such things as pleasure and happiness, things which we would regard as desirable and good for people to have even if no moral credit accrued from pursuing or possessing them. 28

From these distinctions it follows, according to Wood, that Marx's normative views are "nonmoral" as opposed to "moral" since

Marx bases his critique of capitalism on the claim that it frustrates many important nonmoral goods: self-actualization, security, physical health, comfort, community, freedom. 29

Marx's condemnations of capitalism are often based quite explicitly on its failure to provide people with the nonmoral goods listed above, together with the claim that the existing powers of social production could provide them to all members of society if production were organized more rationally and democratically (i.e., socialistically). But Marx never claims that these goods ought to be provided to people because they have a right to them, or because justice (or some other moral norm) demands it. . . . He is evidently persuaded that the obvious nonmoral value of the goods to which he appeals is sufficient, quite apart from appeals to our love of virtue or sense of guilt, to convince any reasonable person to favor the over-

24 Miller, Analyzing Marx, p. 18.
25 Ibid., p. 16.
26 A. Wood, Karl Marx, p. 128.
27 Ibid., p. 126.
28 Ibid., pp. 126-127.
29 Ibid., p. 127.
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throw of a social order which unnecessarily frustrates them and its replacement by one which realizes them.30

But here we ought to separate very carefully the claim that Marx does not base his normative views on conceptions of rights or justice from the claim that he does not base his normative views on any moral norm or norms. Although I shall argue in later chapters that Marx’s critique of rights and justice is unsound because of certain confusions he has concerning these concepts—just as his broader critique of morality as a whole is unsound because of certain misconceptions he has concerning the nature of morality and moral discourse—it should be noted that his rejection of justice and rights (so much commented upon by Wood and others in contemporary philosophical literature) is separate and distinct from his attacks on morality as a whole and must be considered as such. Even if Marx does not base his normative views on the former concepts, he may—though perhaps only implicitly—base them on some other moral norm or norms. But Wood would quite probably agree with this assessment. The bone I wish to pick with Wood concerns his claim that Marx is somehow so different from other philosophers who explicitly claim to be offering a moral theory that his form of practical reason must be designated “nonmoral.”

First notice that if the analysis of Marx’s perspective offered in previous chapters is basically correct, Marx is not exclusively concerned with the nonmoral good. Underlying his view that freedom (as self-determination) is the most important nonmoral good, as well as his view that this nonmoral good must be equally distributed, is his concern for what can only be described as a moral good: human dignity. In addition, the very fact that Marx implicitly demands the equal distribution of freedom—without assuming that such an equal distribution will maximize freedom or some other intrinsically valuable nonmoral good—would seem to indicate that he implicitly harbors some notion of fairness or justice. Although this contention is quite controversial, I shall argue for this thesis in more detail in chapter 8. If this is the case, then Wood’s interpretation fails since he holds that fairness and justice are moral goods.

Second, we should notice that—at least at first glance—Wood’s argument seems to rule out as moral views far too much. It apparently rules out, for example, the utilitarianism of Bentham and J. S. Mill as well as the normative views of Marx. Does not utilitarianism—which prescribes the maximization of pleasure, happiness, considered preferences, or some other nonmoral good—fail (based on Wood’s criteria) to be a moral view? Wood anticipates this objection and attempts to derail it by claiming that the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill is distinguished from Marx’s normative views in that the former—unlike the later—contains a conception of the moral good and (even) an explicitly stated theory relating the moral and nonmoral good. Namely, the moral good consists in the maximization of the (designated) nonmoral good. Wood writes:

The distinction between moral and nonmoral goods is certainly one of which moral philosophers have been aware. Kant is cognizant of it when he distinguishes the “moral” from the “natural” (or “physical”) good, or the “good” (Gut) from “well-being” (Wohl). Mill acknowledges it when he distinguishes the “utilitarian theory of life” (a hedonistic theory of the nonmoral good) from the “utilitarian theory of morality” (which holds that the moral good consists in what is conducive to the greatest nonmoral good).31

But what does all of this prove except that Marx refused to speak in terms of moral (as opposed to nonmoral) goods or explicitly to frame his normative claims in terms of moral obligation or moral right? In short, what does this prove except that Marx refused to put forward an explicit moral theory—something agreed to by all sides. What is the difference between (1) condemning a social system on the grounds that it “starves, enslaves and alienates people,” that it “frustrates human self-actualization, prosperity, and other nonmoral goods,” without using the word “moral” or having a philosophical theory about the relation of the moral and nonmoral good, and (2) condemning a social system on precisely the same grounds while making explicit use of this term or having an explicit theory relating the moral and nonmoral good? The answer to this, I submit, is none whatsoever so long as both sets of normative judgments and principles are: (1) prescriptive, (2) universalizable, and (3) based on considerations of human harm and good (in the broadest senses of these terms). It is certainly arguable that Marx’s normative judgments and principles meet these criteria and are, ipso facto, a set of moral judgments and principles.

The point is that whether or not one has a philosophical theory

30 Ibid., p. 128.

31 Ibid., p. 129.
of the moral good is plainly irrelevant to whether or not one’s normative judgments and principles are moral judgments and principles. Consider the hypothetical case in which Bentham and J. S. Mill expounded all of their views except that they did not explicitly state that they understood the moral good as consisting in whatever is conducive to the maximization of the nonmoral good. Would we have been justified, under these circumstances, in concluding that Bentham and Mill held no moral views? Of course not! Yet this is precisely what Wood recommends we do in the case of Marx! To show Marx is not a moral philosopher is not to show that he is not a moralist, i.e., one having or propounding moral judgments and views. I believe Marx differed from Bentham and perhaps Mill in that he held a (nonreducible) principle of the distribution of the nonmoral good as well as a view of what nonmoral good (or goods) ought to be pursued. But the point is that even if Wood were correct in asserting that Marx’s normative views are based solely on the “nonmoral good of men and women”—i.e., on “actual, objective (although historically conditioned and variable) potentialities, needs, and interests of human beings”—we would not have grounds to conclude that they are not moral views but, rather, that for Marx, just as for J. S. Mill and others, the maximization of the nonmoral good simply constitutes the moral good.

But perhaps Wood would claim that we have not given sufficient attention to his distinction between “valuing or doing something because conscience or ‘moral law’ tells us we ‘ought to’” and “valuing or doing something because it satisfies our needs, our wants or our conceptions of what is good for us (or for someone else whose welfare we want to promote . . .).” But what does this come to? What does it mean to say that “conscience” tells us we ought to do something? What does it mean to say that “moral law” tells us we ought to do something?

Let us consider the latter question first. Unless Wood is here taking the extremist Kantian position that the “moral law” requires that our moral judgments be based exclusively on the “autonomy” (as opposed to the “heteronomy”) of the human will—which means that our practical reasoning can make no reference whatsoever to wants, needs, desires, inclinations, or (what Wood calls) the “nonmoral good”—he must admit that the utilitarian’s moral judgments can be phrased in terms of conformance to “moral law” every bit as easily as those of the Kantian. This is precisely where the traditional distinction between “deontological” and “consequentialist” or “teleological” moral theory fails.

On the traditional account, the former holds that actions are right or wrong according to whether or not they conform to moral law and the latter that actions are right or wrong according to their consequences or effects. But unless we accept Kant’s radical position that the “moral law,” by definition, can have nothing to do with considerations of nonmoral goods and evils, the utilitarian—as Wood admits—can claim that maximizing utility does conform to moral law. The supreme moral law, according to the utilitarian, is to maximize utility, so to follow this dictate is to act according to and in conformance with moral law.

In contrast, the Kantian can equally well claim (if he or she has a mind to) that actions conforming to the moral law (as the Kantian defines it) are morally right precisely because they have the consequence or effect of upholding or conforming to moral law or, alternately, of avoiding or limiting the violations of moral law. Or, to take Kant’s more substantive version of the categorical imperative, which asserts that one is to treat persons always as ends and never as means only, one could say that actions are right or wrong according to the effects they have insofar as people are treated as ends or as means only. The orthodox Kantian would no doubt object to this claim on grounds that the only thing in the world that is truly and unconditionally good is a good will and, therefore, what is really important is not whether people are in fact treated as ends rather than as means only, but the intentions or motives of the persons whose actions we are considering. But this only goes to show that Kant’s moral theory is primarily meant to apply to intentions, motives, and the moral qualities of individuals as opposed to actions per se and, thus, is often found wanting when it comes to judging actions or social practices and institutions.

These considerations show that Wood’s distinction between valuing or doing something because it conforms to moral law and valuing or doing something because it satisfies needs, wants, or our conceptions of what is good for us (or for someone else whose welfare we want to promote) is, to put it mildly, not very useful. Furthermore, his formulation seems to obscure the difference between two pairs of distinctions, namely: (1) the distinction between doing something because it conforms to moral law versus doing something because it satisfies needs or wants, and (2) the distinction between doing something because it satisfies our needs or wants versus doing something because it satisfies needs or wants (or our conception of the nonmoral good) as applied impartially to persons in general. That is, Wood seems to confuse the
J. S. Mill at least in part moral theories? Would they not remain so even if these philosophers had been similar to Marx in the sense of not offering explicit moral theories whose focus was direct, person-to-person relationships as opposed to less direct and intimate social relationships such as those that form economic systems and types of government? The answer to these questions would seem to be a resounding “yes!”

To take an appeal to “love of virtue” or “sense of guilt” as a defining characteristic of moral judgments falsely demarcates morality. Whatever one takes as the defining characteristics of moral judgments or views—prescriptivity, universalizability, social acceptance (either actual or hypothetical), or being based on considerations of human harm and good—one will not normally find “invariably connected with our love of virtue or sense of guilt” among them, even if we recognize such a connection as a natural concomitant of moral judgments of a person-to-person nature. To insist otherwise would seem to indicate that one is operating with an excessively personalistic and Kantian (or “Protestant”) conception of morality.

Since Marx is primarily concerned with evaluating social arrangements as opposed to personal actions, motives, intentions, characteristics, etc., it is not surprising that he is so little concerned with people’s “love of virtue” or “sense of guilt.” This lack of concern for and even overt hostility toward this sort of moralizing on
a personal basis is even more understandable when we take into consideration the fact that, on Marx's view, it is often precisely these sorts of mores or norms that legitimize oppressive social orders in the minds of both the oppressors and the oppressed and thus make significant social change difficult to achieve.

Nevertheless, any principle or standard by which social arrangements are to be judged which is (1) prescriptive, (2) universalizable, and (3) based on considerations of human harm and good is, ipso facto, a moral principle or standard regardless of whether those proposing them have an implicit or explicit conception of the moral good. Thus, rather than automatically taking Marx's claim that he is not making moral judgments or espousing moral principles as good coin, we ought to discern whether or not the normative judgments he (explicitly or implicitly) espouses conform to the defining characteristics listed above. If they do—and it is my contention that this is the case—then they are, ipso facto, moral judgments and principles.

But Richard Miller, as well as Wood, disagrees with this explication of morality. In Analyzing Marx, Miller gives the following description of morality:

As a basis for resolving political questions, that is, for choosing among social arrangements and strategies for attaining them, morality, in the narrow sense, is distinct from self-interest, class interest, rational interest or purely aesthetic concerns. The bases for political decision that we most comfort-ably classify as moral tend to display three features:

1. Equality. People are to be shown equal concern or respect or afforded equal status. In the manner appropriate to choices of institutions and political strategies, everyone is to be treated as an equal. . . . some standard of equality is to be the ultimate basis for resolving conflicts among different people's interests.

2. General norms. The right resolution of any major political issue would result from applying valid general norms to the specific facts of the case at hand. These rules are valid in all societies in which there is a point to resolving political disputes by moral appeal, roughly, all societies in which cooperation benefits almost everyone but scarcity is liable to give rise to conflicts (Hume's and Rawls' "circumstances of justice").

3. Universality. Anyone who rationally reflects on relevant facts and arguments will accept these rules, if he or she has the normal range of emotions.

In portraying Marx as a critic of the moral point of view in politics, I mean that he argues against all three principles as inappropriate to choosing what basic institutions to pursue. While Miller admits that a moral principle or view might lack one or even two of these characteristics, he claims that one will always be present. He mentions no other defining characteristics. On a charitable interpretation, however, it can be argued that Miller's view of morality encompasses the three characteristics I adumbrate above. Prescriptivity is embraced because morality is a basis for "resolving political questions" and "choosing social arrangements and strategies for attaining them." Universalizability is entailed not by his requirement of universality but, rather, by the fact that the prescriptions are general norms. Being based on considerations of human harm and good seems entailed by the fact that his "equality" requirement applies to people's interests. Interests, by definition, have to do with human harm and good.

Although it would seem bizarre to label a principle "moral" if it met only Miller's third characteristic of universality, the primary problem with his explication of morality is not that it leaves out characteristics that ought to be included but, rather, that it includes characteristics that ought to be left out. Consider first the characteristic of universality, which demands unanimous intersubjective agreement among all persons who "rationally reflect on relevant facts and arguments" and have "a normal range of emotions." While this may be a requirement for a principle or view being morally justified, it can hardly be a requirement for its being a moral principle or rule. Consider the following two propositions: (1) Abortion is permissible within the first trimester at the discretion of the mother, and (2) Abortion is not permissible at any time except if necessary to save the life of the mother. I take it as obvious that both of these propositions or rules are moral propositions or rules, even though we have no reason whatever to believe that all persons who meet Miller's conditions will agree on which of the two (if either) is correct. Similar sets of propositions can be constructed at the social level of moral reflection. Consider the proposition "Property rights are basic liberties and cannot be overridden by

Miller, Analyzing Marx, pp. 16-17.
such considerations as increases in the general welfare, political democracy, equal opportunity, or material equality.” Isn’t it obvious that this is a moral principle regardless of whether all persons as described by Miller will agree to accept it? Previewing a thesis I shall put forward in chapter 7, the most that can be said in this context is that we invite all others to agree with us when we assert moral propositions. But being capable of garnering a unanimous intersubjective consensus is not a defining characteristic of a moral proposition.

Next consider the characteristic of equality. Although most of us are certainly willing to accept the requirement that “people are to be shown equal concern or respect or afforded equal status” as a substantive moral principle, it does not seem to be a defining characteristic of moral propositions or principles per se. Miller is obviously speaking of all people in this context, and there are many propositions that seem to be moral propositions that do not afford all persons equal worth. Thus the contention of many ancient philosophers that the freeborn are worthy of a type of concern and respect that slaves are not is seemingly a moral proposition, even if it does not show all persons equal concern and respect and thus is not an acceptable one.

But once Miller further specifies what this equality requirement entails, it becomes objectionable for other, more important reasons. The crux of the matter is that when he claims that this principle “requires neutrality among different people’s interests,” he does not have in mind merely the interests all people have qua simply being human, i.e., those interests that correlate with people’s basic needs or even with what Rawls designates as social primary goods. Rather, Miller means all of the interests a person has at any particular point in time, regardless of whether they correlate to genuine needs or merely to desires, and regardless of whether they are in some suitable sense legitimate.

When the purported fact that morality “requires neutrality among different people’s interests” is conjoined with the stipulation that by “interests” we are to mean all the actual interests people have—which, for example, will include the interests of some people to maintain exploitative or unjust social arrangements, or even cruel and inhuman social practices—it immediately follows that Marxists cannot accept morality while remaining true to their normative political commitments. As Wood puts this point:

The proletarian movement as Marx depicts it lacks the disinterestedness or impartiality which normally goes along with moral concerns. Morality is normally taken to involve in principle an equal concern and respect for the interests of all. . . . The proletarian movement, however, gives primacy to the interests of the proletarian class, and shows little or no concern for the interests of capitalists, landowners and other classes whose fundamental interests are hostile to proletarian ones.34

But notice that this will be a problem not only for Marxists. It will be a problem for almost anyone else who bothers to think about it. If morality absolutely requires that we give equal weight to all interests, no matter how pervasive or unjust, then in some cases we will not be able to side with one good person against two or more villains. But under these circumstances, conscientious people will have no choice but to reject “morality.” But would not the conscientious persons in question be rejecting Miller’s sort of “morality” on precisely moral grounds? Obviously something has gone awry in Miller’s analysis. (Miller might here take Wood’s tack and claim that we are employing an overly broad concept of morality in speaking of “moral grounds” above, but—for reasons given in my earlier critique of Wood—I don’t think such a tack would be successful. In addition, I strongly suspect that most people’s linguistic intuitions will go against Miller and Wood on this point.)

Some Marxist-oriented writers have suggested that the fact that there are such incompatible interests in class-divided societies need not overly worry the Marxist since, for example, those who are exploited are far more numerous than those who exploit (and thus have an interest in maintaining exploitative social arrangements). As Kai Nielsen puts it when considering Wood’s “class interest argument” and “Marxist immorality” position:

The Marxist, rightly or wrongly, conceives the matter in such a way that the class interests of proletarians will also, as a matter of fact (though surely not as a matter of definition), be the interests of the vast majority of humankind.

In morality, when push comes to shove, numbers count.

. . . Where interests of the same type and of the same order of importance intractably conflict and both interests cannot be

satisfied, morality requires that we satisfy the greater or more extensive interests where this can be ascertained. Thus where proletarian interests conflict with capitalist interests of the same order, the proletarian interests trump them: the interests of the proletariat are in fact the interests of the vast majority, while the interests of the capitalist are those of a very small minority.35

But even though this observation is both true and significant, I submit that it is not the only nor even the most important reason for supporting the interests of the proletariat and other oppressed and/or exploited classes or groups. The main reason to support their interests and oppose those of the capitalists, I submit, is that the interests of the proletariat are legitimate and those of the capitalist (in this respect) are not. The important point for present purposes is not whether the Marxist perspective on this issue is correct, but whether the fact that there are more exploited people than exploiters wards off the above criticism of the Miller-Wood thesis, i.e., that moral judgment must be absolutely impartial between people’s actual interests. To see that it does not, all one need do is imagine that the numbers are reversed, i.e., that there are more exploiters than people exploited. Would we then automatically have to accept exploitative social arrangements because they conform to more people’s interests? Perhaps certain sorts of consequentialists would feel compelled to do so, but it is by no means clear that all rational, humane persons must likewise feel compelled. One perfectly reasonable response that can be given on moral grounds is simply to reject the claim that we must give equal weight to all actual interests of all people. That is to say, being committed to the view that morality requires us to show people equal concern and respect is not the same as and does not entail that we must give equal weight to all actual interests of all people. As Allen Buchanan notes:

Miller’s conclusion that Marx rejects not only justice but also all morality as such (not just the bourgeois variety) rests on an implausibly narrow conception of morality. In fact, Miller’s view of morality is so constructed that neither Aristotle’s view, nor utilitarianism, nor John Rawls’s theory, nor Kant’s, nor any position that permits destruction of incorrigible, danger-

ous criminals or of the enemy in a just war seems to count as a morality.36

Miller . . . says that Marx believed that the bourgeoisie and their allies are not to be accorded “equal status,” that their interests are not to be taken seriously, and this, Miller thinks, shows that Marx rejected the Equality Principle. (He does concede, however, that for Marx the fact that something would be in someone’s interest is a reason in favor of it.) Miller does not see that on this criticism, not only Rawls’s theory and Kant’s, but every deontological theory—every view which ascribes to the priority of the right over the good—fails to qualify as a moral view. For as Rawls points out, it is distinctive of deontological moral theories that they do not count all interests equally. Indeed, some interests—namely those that run contrary to principles of justice—are to be given no weight at all. It is true that such theories, at least if they are Kantian, nevertheless claim that all persons are to be treated with equal respect. But this is taken to be quite compatible with depriving the individual of his liberties and even his life if he is sufficiently evil or if he is an enemy in a just war—so long as we use no more force than is needed, avoid unnecessary suffering, and so on. (Indeed, Locke, that quintessential “bourgeois moralist,” maintained that incorrigible criminals forfeit their rights and may be destroyed like dangerous beasts.)37

Moreover, if we accept Miller’s views, it turns out that even a principle like “Don’t kill innocent people for the sole reason that doing so affords you a small gain in utility” does not count as a moral principle. This is because whoever stands to gain even a small amount of utility by committing a murder has an interest in doing so. This interest is perhaps not a basic nor a legitimate interest, but it is an interest nonetheless. Hence, such a principle is not impartial as to everyone’s interests. Arguably, it does not even show equal concern and respect for everyone’s interests. Thus, in Miller’s view, it fails to meet the equality requirement and, hence, is not a moral principle. But while Miller may be perfectly content with this conclusion, I think that it rather obviously does violence to the term “moral” as normally construed. To put it bluntly, if this is not a moral proposition or principle, then nothing is a moral


36 Buchanan, “Marx, Morality, and History,” p. 120.

37 Ibid., p. 121.
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are actually a form of ethical egoism and are, for this reason, not moral views.

Marxism, Naturalistic Inclinations, and Rational Self-Interest

Another tack often taken by recent and contemporary defenders of the thesis of "Marx's Anti-moralism" is that of claiming that Marx and Marxists are committed to ethical egoism in practical reasoning. This view, in turn, is often defended by attempting to drive a wedge between Marxism and morality by adopting a Freudian or psychoanalytic view of morality. One proponent of this view is Lewis Feuer. In his well-known article, "Ethical Theories and Historical Materialism," published in 1942, he explains:

From the psychological standpoint, ethical terms may be described as the terms of the "superego language." The superego is made up of social values which are derived through the conditioning influences of parents, nursemaids, teachers. Moral restrictions are external in origin, but they are subsequently "introjected" (in other words, "internalized") within the child. The source of these restrictions is, in later years, repressed; the child is now swayed by "the man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct," as Adam Smith puts it. The superego, which takes over the parental function, holds aloft certain ideals, and criticizes our activities.

The function of ethical terms as the vehicles of social manipulation now becomes clear. The person who uses such terms is trying to have you identify him with your superego. He addresses you with a vocabulary which touches off tensions and anxieties, a vocabulary which stirs the unconscious in ways with which you cannot cope. Disobedience to an ethical statement carries with it a sense of moral guilt, the outcome of a conflict between conscience and desire. 39

The basic notion here is that morality, as Freud claims, is a means by which an individual's naturalistic inclinations are repressed in order to conform with social norms and is thus a form of social manipulation and control. In class-divided societies, the argument continues, it is the oppressed classes that are most deprived of the means and opportunities to fulfill their naturalistic

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inclinations. In these sorts of societies, morality functions to make the oppressed classes accept their oppression. Morality is a reactionary—or at least conservative—form of ideology (in the narrow, critical sense of the term) and ought to be opposed by Marxists and all revolutionary socialists. Above all, morality should not be allowed entrance into one’s scientific views of society or into one’s ideology (in the global sense of the term).

Anthony Skillen and Andrew Collier also argue along these general lines. Skillen, for example, claims:

Moral thought characteristically rests on an assumed “individualism”—egoism, selfishness, anti-sociability—at the core of human nature. Morality’s function, then, is precisely to inhibit this natural selfishness and guide us in some sort of modus vivendi with “others”. By virtue of our conscience we have a power to regulate our naturally rampant lower self.

It was left to Nietzsche and Freud to explore this intra-psychic subordination more deeply. . . . considered as authoritative Knower of Right and Wrong, the conscience is an illusion. Scientifically described, what we have here is an internalized, socially formed force funded by the spontaneous love and hate the little child feels for his needed but frustrating and humiliating parents.

Morality in this sense then, is a sort of suppression, rationalized as the necessary subjection by a higher power of what is base—whether the enemy is presented as “the flesh”, “the self”, “the false self”, “impulse”, or “petit-bourgeois tendencies”. The moral “must” is the individualistic form of socially inculcated demands.

Collier endorses a similar Freudian account of the inculcation of moral values and the function of morality. He then claims:

Historical materialism must treat morality as an ideology with a function in any society based on class exploitation. Any ex-

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exploiting class will benefit from the prevalence of an ideology which will reconcile the exploited to the deprivation of possible satisfactions which they will suffer as a result of their exploitation. Hence the required ideology must be antagonistic to natural values (happiness, the satisfaction of wants) and lead its adherents to be prepared to sacrifice them. Its function is thus negative, but it must make this negative aspect appear as in some way a positive value. Its imperatives must stand independently of and in opposition to naturalistic ones. Finally, it must persuade its adherents to change themselves—abandon wants they have in favor of ones which can be fulfilled in the context of the class society in which they are exploited.

A moral ideology must therefore (a) be independent of and antagonistic to naturalistic values; (b) be conducive to the attempt to change oneself rather than to change the world; (c) find a source of appeal other than that based on conduciveness to satisfaction.

Assuming that Collier is taking all morality to be a form of ideology and is thus indicting morality as a whole rather than some subset of moral views or theories, this analysis is not adequate. First, although most moral theories, codes, etc., seem to meet conditions (a) and (c), some—e.g., strict forms of hedonistic utilitarianism—do not. Furthermore, neither of these would seem to be negative features of morality or features that make morality or moral theories ideological in the negative, critical sense of the term (more on this in chapter 6). But the most important difference between the moral theory Skillen and Collier are attacking and the form of practical reasoning they see Marx as utilizing seems to be that the latter is egocentric in nature and the former—as any moral theory—is not.

But it is actually quite fortunate from a Marxist point of view that people generally accept moral theories or codes that are at least to some degree antagonistic to natural values, which to some extent find a source of appeal to considerations other than personal satisfaction and are not egocist. If this were not the case, there quite probably would be no socialist militants and no revolutionary heroes because acting purely out of self-interest and on prudential considerations calculated to maximize personal satisfaction or one’s own naturalistic interests and needs—which both Skillen

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4 For a similar argument for the incompatibility of Marxism and morality based on the good reasons concept of morality and a Marxist critique of bourgeois society and ideology, see Michael Lerner, "Marxism and Ethical Reasoning," Social Praxis, vol. 2, no. 1-2 (1974). Lerner’s position seems open to many of the same objections cited here. See also Kai Nielsen’s response to Lerner ("Class Conflict, Marxism and the Good Reason Approach") in the same volume.

42 Ibid., p. 13.
43 Ibid., p. 13.
and Collier endorse as an alternate (nonmoral) form of practical reasoning—would much more likely lead individuals away from rather than toward revolutionary political activity. (This issue will be taken up in greater detail in the last section of the present chapter.) However, we might note here, with Kai Nielsen, that even if one accepts the satisfaction of people's naturalistic inclinations as the sumnum bonum for purposes of practical reasoning, as well as the Marxist's empirical claim that socialism is more conducive to fulfilling this condition than capitalism,

there is a further question Marxists need to face. That socialism is in the collective interests of the working class does not establish that it is in the immediate individual interest of all members of the working class or that in all situations it is in the interests of a given member of the working class to support or act in solidarity with their own class. In the struggle for socialism sacrifices will sometimes be necessary for some members of the working class and it will be necessary, in the attainment of class consciousness, for at least some individuals, immersed in the culture of possessive individualism, to attain a sense of class solidarity and to move from a preoccupation with the egoistic "I" to a commitment to the "We".

Finally, it is simply false that feature (b) Collier puts forward in the previously cited paragraph is a characteristic or, rather, a defining characteristic of morality. It is not the case that all moral theories, codes, etc., are "conducive to the attempt to change oneself rather than to change the world" or that in this or some other way they always reconcile the exploited to their deprivation. Marx and Engels both seem to have recognized this fact. Engels states, for example, that

as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality was always a class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class or as soon as the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented the revolt against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. That in this process there has on the whole been progress in morality... cannot be doubted [emphasis added].

In connection with this point, Nielsen argues that though "Marxists and socialists are, and must remain, committed to a cer-
tain scheduling of values, to a certain moral picture of the world," accepting these moral values

[does] not at all dampen down [the socialist's] will to take part in the class struggle. It is only when some conceptions, which are quite foreign to socialism, are attached to select parts of that moral picture that it has the pacifying effects of a moral ideology... Claiming that Marxism views all moralizing, including all talk of justice, as ideological twaddle can only muddy the waters intellectually and humanly. It is bad theory and bad practice.

It may well be the case that Skillen, Collier, and other proponents of this kind of Freudian-Marxist approach to "morality" are, in reality, using this term more narrowly than the rest of us. It may be that they do not take "morality" to be defined as all commendations, condemnations, prescriptions, etc., put forward in universalizable form and made on the basis of consideration of human harm and good (in the broadest senses of these terms). If so, their arguments—even if telling against the particular sort of morality or moral theories they have in mind—are not effective against morality or moral theory as a whole and certainly do not show Marxism and morality to be incompatible.

Let us now consider a related version of the claim that Marx may have normative principles and positions, but they are not moral in nature. It has been suggested in recent philosophical literature that though Marxism has a normative component or method of practical reasoning it cannot be said to be a moral form of practical reasoning because, rather than being "universalistic" and based on considerations of human harm and good, it is individualistic in the sense of having the individual as its focal point and based solely on considerations of the "natural" self-interest of the individual. Both Skillen and Collier, in the journal Radical Philosophy and elsewhere, have argued that (1) Marx repudiates morality on grounds that it is a form of ideology; (2) morality—in order to function as conservator of an established repressive social order—must get the majority of individuals to renounce fulfillment of

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* Nielsen, "Justice and Ideology," p. 166.
* ibid., pp. 176–177.
* Skillen, "Marxism and Morality," "Workers' Interest and the Proletarian Ethic," and *Riding Illusions*. See also Collier, "The Production of Moral Ideology," and "Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values." (In the latter essay, it should be noted, Collier adds several significant caveats to his position.)
their natural inclinations and desires; and (3) an alternate, preferable form of practical reasoning from a Marxist point of view is one that, as Collier puts it, "involves understanding one's own needs, developing them in such a way that their most satisfying form of satisfaction is possible, gaining knowledge of and therefore power over the world, selecting the best means for the satisfaction of needs, etc." He adds that "practical reasoning in this sense is not universalistic in nature, i.e., it does not necessarily take 'the good of all' as its end."

It is important to realize that Skillen and Collier are not just attributing to Marx the empirical thesis that—at least in capitalist society—people do act (for the most part) on the basis of (perceived) self-interest, or the thesis that the working class will be motivated primarily (if not exclusively) by considerations of self-interest to undertake revolutionary activity in order to overthrow capitalism and establish a post-capitalist society. Both of these claims, as interpretations of Marx, are relatively noncontroversial. Their controversial claim is that Marx endorses a form of practical reasoning based exclusively on self-interest or, in other words, that Marx's normative theory is essentially a form of ethical egoism.

The notion that the normative component of Marxism can and should be based on the naturalistic, rational self-interest of individuals qua individuals rather than on the moral point of view can be shown to be wrongheaded on two grounds. First, such a conception is radically at odds with Marx's own fundamental evaluative commitments and perspective, and, second, it simply cannot account for the Marxist's own evaluative judgments concerning social and economic conditions or political events.

As emphasized previously, the appeal to self-interest as a moral theory is at odds with Marx's ideal of the "truly human" or "truly social" individual who will, on his view, inhabit communist society in opposition to the egoistic, self-interested individuals who presently inhabit bourgeois society. While Marx believes that human individuals will fully embody this sort of social or communal consciousness only in communist society, it is nevertheless clear that he holds this sense of human community to be intrinsically good. While Marx is not really concerned to judge individuals in existing society as better or worse in proportion to the degree they espouse the value of human community, he is concerned to insist that it is better for people to embody this value than not to embody it and that communism is to be preferred to capitalism (partially) because it allows this value to be more fully realized than capitalism can or does.

Marx's vision of "socialized man" may in some sense go "beyond morality" just as his vision of communism certainly goes beyond considerations of justice (since it hypothesizes the elimination of moderate scarcity, which is, as Hume pointed out, a necessary condition for questions of distributive justice cogently to arise). If so, however, it certainly goes in precisely the opposite direction to that preferred by the anti-moralist in interpreting Marx's normative views. Whereas the anti-moralist envisions individuals pursuing their own naturalistic inclinations and looking out only for their self-interest, Marx envisions individuals who have evolved to such a high level of social consciousness that they automatically (as if by second nature) act in accordance with the common good. There could hardly be two evaluative perspectives that are farther apart.

There is a second reason why a form of practical reasoning based on egoistic considerations of the rational self-interest of individuals fails as an interpretation of Marx's normative views. While it is clear that Marx and Marxists wholeheartedly endorse the self-realization of the human individual, they also realize that it is at times good and, indeed, essential that working-class individuals—and, in fact, all individuals who have committed themselves to the betterment of humanity—set aside the direct pursuit of satisfaction for the sake of the class struggle and advancement of socialism. Proletarians (and others) are often tempted by the system in which they live to abandon (or simply fail to accept) radical political goals and activities in exchange for a more favorable position in the social and economic status quo. If Marxists were to accept the naturalistic self-interest form of practical reasoning, as Skillen and Collier suggest, there would be no grounds for the Marxist's soundly entrenched judgment that people should not be co-opted in this way. In fact, the conclusion they would be forced to draw is the exact opposite: proletarians should allow themselves to be co-opted if it is to their advantage!

There is, however, a possible rejoinder to this objection, namely, that the kinds of personal gain (more wealth, leisure, status, prestige, etc.) potentially obtainable by the (co-opted) proletarian in capitalist society may fall short of the personal gains (true human community, all-around development, etc.) that are
attainable only within a socialist or communist society. But this rejoinder to the above criticism of Skillen’s and Collier’s rather Hobbesian interpretation of Marx’s normative views would not seem to be available to them. First, this claim seems to require a qualitative assessment of these various types of goods so that the appropriate comparison can be made. But to make such qualitative assessments would seem to require that moral principles of some sort be brought to bear since the mere satisfaction of our naturalistic inclinations seems to afford no grounds for making such qualitative judgments. If, on the other hand, one restricts oneself strictly to quantitative comparisons of the satisfaction of naturalistic inclinations—a view to which Skillen and Collier seem committed—it will be difficult to prove that the proletarian’s satisfaction will be greater in future socialist or communist society than it will be if he or she allows himself or herself to be co-opted in a capitalist society. This is especially true if we are trying to convince the individuals in question that they actively ought to support the socialist movement in circumstances that may entail substantial self-sacrifice or even death now in order to realize higher gains at a later period, i.e., after a successful revolution and the establishment of socialism or communism. But what could possibly convince the egoistic individual concerned to maximize his own rational self-interest that the “higher goods” available in post-capitalist societies are so superior to the goods available to him in capitalist society that he ought to risk that which is, from the prudential point of view, the ultimate good (i.e., one’s own life), not to mention the goods of liberty (e.g., staying out of prison), income, leisure, etc.

There are two possible answers to this question. The first is that the risk of substantial self-sacrifice turns out to be so low and the gains to be made by the individual (human community, all-around development, etc.) are so highly valued that the individual is willing to risk his or her life—not to mention the possible loss of other goods—in order to give active support to the socialist movement. This answer hardly seems viable in the real world, however, since the risk is often not of an extremely low order of probability and the preference structures of individuals in capitalist societies do not seem to rate very highly such goods as human community.

Another possible answer is that by one’s failure to support the socialist movement actively one incurs a greater risk of death (or other hardship) than one would incur in doing so. This might be the case, for example, if revolutionary proletarians utilized coercion against other proletarians in order to gain their own ends, i.e., concerted working-class action to overthrow capitalism. It seems quite doubtful, however, that such a strategy could engender the type of commitment that is presumably necessary for the success of a mass revolutionary movement. Furthermore, as an attempt to save the rational self-interested interpretation of Marx, this seems to fail because, as Buchanan notes:

Marx nowhere . . . even suggests that the threat of either imminent or post-revolutionary violence plays a role in motivating the proletariat to action. It is, of course, true that Marx predicts that violence will be used during the revolution against the bourgeoisie and against those lumpenproletarians whom it hires to fight its battles. Further, his doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat implies that for some time after it has come to power the proletariat will find it necessary to employ coercion against the remnants of the bourgeoisie or perhaps even against proletarians who are still infected with bourgeois attitudes. But Marx does not say or even suggest that coercion will be needed in order to spur the proletariat to action.\(^5\)

Since neither of these answers is viable, there seems to be no good answer one can give to rational egoists who want to know why they should risk substantial self-sacrifice in order to give active support to the socialist movement. (Notice that on the assumption that people should do what is in their own self-interest, the Marxist lacks an answer to the proletarian who is in a position to be co-opted within bourgeois society as well as to any individual—proletarian or nonproletarian—who values tranquillity and finds the prospect of substantial self-sacrifice unappealing.) Yet it is obvious that Marx holds the normative position that proletarians (and others) should support the movement to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. The rational self-interest interpretation of Marx simply cannot account for this fact.

Along similar lines, it is impossible on this view for the Marxist to account for his or her considered moral judgment that those who take part in the class struggle in a fashion above and beyond the call of duty have done something truly morally commendable. It is, in short, impossible to make room for acts of supererogation. As Peter Bins puts it:

\(^5\) Buchanan, Marx and Justice, p. 93.
Within Collier's theory there is no room for acts of supererogation, and especially not when they lead to the agent's own death. If all acts are to be judged by the mechanical operations of... [Collier's] felicit calculus many of the courageous acts which have inspired millions of workers, from the Paris Commune to the 1905 Petersburg Soviet would have been mistaken pure and simple. Yet in spite of the fact that from the point of view of many individuals involved, "self-interest" could never have justified their action, who could doubt [from a Marxist point of view] the value and the correctness of what they did.53

Although Marx is not a moralist in the sense that he preaches morality or puts forward explicit moral proclamations, it can be said that if one is operating with the concept of morality as we have defined it—that is, the concept of morality wherein moral principles and standards are construed as universalizable prescriptions (or condemnations, commendations, etc.) based on human ill and well-being that are (at least under nonextreme conditions) considered to be binding on one's conduct—then his thought is absolutely and thoroughly imbued with moral judgments and principles. Marx's demands that alienation and exploitation be abolished and that a society embodying the values of freedom, human community, and self-realization be created are obviously based on considerations of human ill and well-being. Furthermore, although he does not explicitly state the matter as such, he thinks that all individuals ought to strive to implement these demands even though, according to his empirical theory, it is inevitable in a class-divided society that some individuals will not accept these moral principles and imperatives.

Collier and other proponents of "Marx's Anti-moralism" can, however, point to such declarations on the part of Marx as:

The communists do not preach morality at all... They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egotists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is under definite conditions a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals.54

Does this not prove the anti-moralist's claim? To this, I think the answer is no. In the first place, it shows only that here Marx is utilizing an extremely limited conception of morality, in which morality is a matter only of principles of individual action (as opposed to a matter also of principles by which to judge social arrangements) and in which the claim that moral poisoning can be a major source of social change seems to be presupposed. Second, to read this passage as an endorsement of egoism would, indeed, be an instance of selective perception: Marx does not here claim that one ought to be an egoist but only that egoism—as well as selflessness—is, under certain conditions, the necessary form of the individual's struggle for survival.

Morality, Self-Interest, and Revolutionary Motivation

This brings us to the topic of the Marxist theory of revolutionary motivation. The interpretative question is whether Marx believes that the revolutionary motivation of the proletariat is exclusively a matter of acting from self-interest or that self-interest is only the primary or most important element. The substantive, empirical question is which of these alternatives—if either—is a correct account of revolutionary motivation. Although it is clear that in Marx's mature works self-interest is the primary motivational factor in his causal story concerning social revolution, it is, it seems to me, by no means the exclusive factor on his view. In addition to the above quotation in which he mentions "selflessness," Marx writes in the preface to volume I of Capital: "Apart from higher motives... their own most important interests dictate to the classes that are for the nonce the ruling ones, the removal of all legally removable hindrances to the free development of the working class"55 (emphasis added).

In such programmatic documents as his "Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association" and "General Rules of the International Working Men's Association," both written in 1864, Marx also reveals his belief that the moral views or commitments of individuals will play some part in their motivation for political action. Despite protestations to Engels in their private correspondence, Marx found it necessary in the former document to

56 See Marx—Engels: Selected Correspondence, pp. 138-139. In a letter to Engels, dated Nov. 4, 1864, in which he reports on the ongoing efforts by socialists in London to write a declaration of principles and provisional rules for the founding of the Working Men's International Association, Marx writes that he "was really alarmed when I heard... an appallingly wordy, badly written and quite raw preamble, pretending to be a declaration of principles... the whole coated over with the vaguest scraps of French socialism." He reports further that after conniving to
cited the "simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of individuals"8 and in the latter to claim that "the struggle for the emancipation of working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule."9 He writes further that "all societies and individuals adhering to [the International Working Men's Association] will acknowledge truth, justice, and morality as the basis of their conduct toward each other and towards all men, without regard to colour, creed, or nationality"10 (all emphases added).

Now these proclamations may well be rather bizarre exceptions to the overwhelming majority of Marx's remarks about morality, rights, and justice—which view them as "ideological nonsense," unhelpful in the revolutionary struggle, or at least headed for obsolescence in coming communist society—but it is most interesting that he chooses the occasions on which he has the most direct and immediate impact on the socialist movement to acquiesce and put them forward. Together with the other passages cited above does this not indicate that Marx actually put more store in such concepts or principles as motivating factors than he was willing to admit? It seems to me that it does.

But here we should carefully distinguish two questions. First, does Marx think that there are both self-interested and nonself-interested (or other-regarding) motives for revolutionary action? Second, does Marx think that purely self-interested motives are sufficient for successful revolutionary action? It may well be the case that he would have answered both questions in the affirmative but, be that as it may, the thesis that purely self-interested motives are sufficient for successful revolutionary action seems to me extremely dubious. Even in his day it seems doubtful that motives of self-interest would have been sufficient especially in light of the fact that the leadership of the workers' movement was then—as it is now—generally provisioned from the relatively priv

Marx underestimated the resilience of capitalism and its potential for reform. Many workers have not become revolutionaries for the simple reason that their lot has improved significantly since Marx's day. The crushing contradictions of capitalism have given way to the tolerable tensions of the welfare state. The normative inadequacies of Marx's view [that proletarian revolution will be motivated solely by considerations of self-interest] seems to follow as a matter of course: granted the proletariat's improved condition, it is no longer obvious that revolutionary activity is rational [on this basis].

Thus the necessity of an explanation of the moral necessity of the world socialist revolution seems even more essential. It may be that socialist revolutions—if they do occur in advanced capitalist societies—will be based at least as much on the moral outrage to which capitalism gives rise as on the self-interest of the proletariat and other oppressed classes.

Buchanan, however, thinks there is "a much more radical objection" to the view that self-interest is a sufficient condition for the rationality of revolutionary action among the proletariat.

Stated in the boldest and boldest form, it is the charge that even if revolution is in the best interest of the proletariat, and even if every member of the proletariat realizes that this is so, so far as its members act rationally, this class will not achieve concerted revolutionary action. This shocking conclusion rests on the premise that concerted revolutionary action is for the proletariat a public good in the technical sense. By a public good is meant any object or state of affairs such that if it is available to anyone in a group it is available to every other member of the group, including those who have not shared in the costs of producing it. Therefore provision of the public good . . . is threatened by the free-rider problem. Each member of the group, if rational, will reason as follows: "Re-

\footnote{Marx, "Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association," p. 381.}

\footnote{Marx, "General Rules of the International Working Men's Association," p. 19.}

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Buchanan, Marx and Justice, p. 88.}
gardless of whether I contribute or not, either enough of the others will contribute to provide good G or they will not. If the former, then the good will be available to me free of charge and my contribution would be wasted. If the latter, then my contribution would again be a loss to me. So rational self-interest requires that I not contribute and go for a ‘free ride’ on the efforts of others.”

For purposes of analysis, this problem can be broken down into an empirical and normative component. Let us first consider the empirical component and ask whether or not, in the real world, this gives rise to a practical problem from a Marxist point of view. That—in the case of revolutionary motivation—this is, for the most part, a theoretical rather than a practical problem is borne out by all historical cases of revolutionary movements. The vast majority of those activists who work incessantly to bring about a revolution, as well as the vastly greater number of individuals who are swept up by the rising revolutionary tide during the course of an actual revolution, almost undoubtedly do not act solely on the basis of a careful, rational calculation of their long-term and short-term self-interest. As an empirical assumption then, the claim that revolutionary motivation is only a matter of self-interest seems implausible, and thus the “free-rider” problem simply does not arise at the practical level.

The correct analysis of this may be the one Elster suggests. After stating that “explaining class consciousness amounts to explaining why members of a class choose the cooperative strategy in the Prisoner’s Dilemma,” Elster goes on to ask: “Assuming that the class members have a correct understanding of their interests as a class, what motivations are needed to generate collective action?”

On one account . . . which seems more adequate to working class collective action, cooperation reflects a transformation of individual psychology so as to include feelings of solidarity, altruism, fairness, and the like. A related, yet different account suggests that collective action ceases to become a Prisoner’s Dilemma because members cease to regard participa-

"Marxist anti-moralism" as costly: It becomes a benefit in itself, over and above the public good it is intended to produce.

But if the empirical thesis that revolutionary motivation is purely a matter of self-interest is false and thus no practical problem arises along these lines, might it nevertheless be the case that there is a normative problem here—a problem of the justification of revolutionary action and motivation? A normative problem would arise if an ethic of rational self-interest were the most reasonable one for people to accept or the only one they were capable of being governed by, but this also is not the case. Although Buchanan sees severe problems for the “Marxian who wishes to rehabilitate Marx’s theory of revolutionary motivation by conceding a significant role to moral principles,” it must nevertheless be conceded that to act rationally is to pursue one’s ends in an efficient manner and that, for those who accept moral as well as prudential ends, to act morally—to do what is morally required—is, all things being equal, to act rationally. This, I take it, is at least the starting point for procuring a solution to the public goods problem of revolutionary activity, considered as a normative rather than an empirical difficulty.

Be that as it may, it is interesting to note that the later Classical Marxists were more amenable than Marx to express the “necessity” of socialist revolution in moral terms, though they, like Marx, relentlessly pointed out the dangers of appealing solely to moral considerations or even of taking such considerations to be the primary motivating force for revolutionary action. Lenin, for example, in his “Address at Congress of Russian Young Communist League,” asks:

Is there such a thing as communist ethics? Is there such a thing as communist morality? Of course, there is. It is often made to appear that we have no ethics of our own; and very often the bourgeoisie accuse us Communists of repudiating all ethics. This is the method of shuffling concepts, of throwing dust in the eyes of the workers and peasants.

Morality serves to help human society rise to a higher level and get rid of the exploitation of labor.
... morality is what serves to destroy the old exploiting society and to unite all laboring people around the proletariat, which is creating a new communist society.

Communist morality is the morality which serves this struggle, which unites the toilers against all exploitation.68

It should be noted that Lenin is not offering here a definition of morality when he says that morality is "what serves to destroy the old, exploiting society and unite all laboring people around the proletariat." Rather, he is claiming that the correct set of moral principles or views—when conjointed with Marxist empirical theory—entails that the old exploiting society ought to be destroyed and that everyone ought to support the movement to build a new communist (or socialist) society. This is made clear in another part of Lenin's address where he indicates the moral principle(s) that he perceives as underlying the socialist's commitment to socialism and to the proletarian movement. There he states that "the old society was based on the principle: rob or be robbed, work for others or make others work for you, be a slave-owner or a slave."69

The society with which Lenin is implicitly contrasting this old society is obviously one that does not have these characteristics, one that is, rather, a society of equality, one in which the relationships of domination he speaks of no longer exist. And it is clearly Lenin's contention that we should support and promote the latter sort of society and not the former.

Though Marx—given his negative feelings toward morality—did not put it this way, it seems clear that the Marxist's considered moral judgment must be that we all have duties to defend and promote progressive social arrangements and that these duties at least sometimes override considerations of self-interest. Perhaps more importantly—at least from a tactical point of view—even if Marxists and socialists continue to have ambivalent feelings toward morality and/or moral theorizing, they cannot afford to abandon them. As Kai Nielsen puts it:

Whether socialists like it or not, such moral-talk will be in the air. A clear establishment of the moral viability of socialism will help in motivating intelligentsia into taking the standpoint of labour and it will provide, to the extent that these egalitarian moral claims can be seen to be justified, an impor-

68 Ibid., p. 273.
69 Ibid., pp. 273-274.