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Marx's Critique of Normative Ethics: It's Relevance

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Abstract: *It is not unusual to hear the view that Marxism is outdated and has no direct bearing on the social system we live in. true, I believe that some aspects of the theory are outdated; still there are other important assertions of Marx which could not easily be abandoned. The important contribution of Marx with regard to morality, I think, is his high concern to make autonomous men to be the standard upon which everything is directed and assessed. For Marx, ethics should be based on the standards of human nature and abilities. What is good for human beings is that which is in accordance with human nature and continues to be treated based on their own nature.*

Keywords: Dialectics, Idealism, Materialism, Morality

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the main themes of Marx morality. Indeed, Marx didn't provide a consciously formulated ethical system; rather his ethical conception is closely attached with at least his four concepts: historical materialism, Ideology, alienation and surplus value. In connection with Marx's morality, there are disagreements among scholars. Some scholars argue that Marx didn't have any ethical theory and he rejected morality at all. On the other hand, some scholars claim that Marx didn't reject morality at all, rather they contend that he provides a moral theory that elevates the well- being of the absolute majority by abandoning a moral theory that intensify the exploitation of man by man. Marx rejected any formal moral imperative that arguably could be formulated in such a way by abstracting it from the real material production of a society.

Generally, the paper consists of two parts. Part one deals with Marx's dialectical materialism, historical materialism and other basic concepts. The second part is extensively devoted for the analysis of Marx's morality.

PART ONE

Dialectical Materialism

The history of western philosophy has shown a perpetual debate among philosophers 'on the relation between consciousness and being. The center of the debate revolves on the question which one of the two, i.e. consciousness or being is primary. What makes this question so important in philosophical inquiry is that answers for the question determine the solution of all other philosophical problems. Accordingly, since

antiquity philosophers have developed two contesting and basic trends. These are: Idealism and materialism. Indeed, both these trends are as old as philosophy itself. In classical Greek philosophy, for instance, Plato can be considered as an objective idealist philosopher. On the other hand, philosophers like Democritus and Epicurus were the classical founders of materialism.

Here, my main interest is not to offer detailed exposition about idealism and materialism, but let us come to see briefly the basic tenets of idealism and materialism. Idealists believe that the "spirit" or "consciousness" is the primary and matter has a derivative character. They maintain that consciousness existed prior to matter and brought in to being, and that is the primary foundation 'of everything that exists (Afansyev, 1980). On the other hand, materialism begins its discourse with a premise that matter exists independently of our consciousness. For materialists, matter is eternal, that no one had ever created it and that consciousness is the product of the historical development of matter (Ibid).

Against the claims of idealism, materialism asserts that it is hardly possible to trace the origin of ideas independently of material social life. For them, ideas are fully explicable only changes within the real material world, from changes the way men live and produce. One famous line of thought of materialism is that it explains our thinking from our being our ideas from our life and labor (ibid). On the other hand, idealist assert that ideas are independent of material world, doesn't originate from the material world but from the mind. And ideas are primary because changes in the material life of men originate from ideas. And

ideas are primary because changes in the material life of men originate from ideas. It is within this hot debate and framework that Karl Marx has come out as an influential figure who interpreted the history of human social development scientifically by adopting historical materialism. Marx's materialism explains men's ideas from their productive activity and the structure of society.

According to Marx doctrine of historical materialism there is an economic basis for all human institutions, thought and action. An individual's intellectual, political and social development is conditioned by mode of production of the material means of existence. Those who control the social economic system in which ideas of history, art, religion, and philosophy prevail in a given era. Moral ideas and standards, though falsely believed by traditional moral philosophers to be products of pure reasons are also conditioned by the material conditions of life (Kevin:67).

As it can be clearly seen from the quotation, Marx gives primacy for social being; in a sense it determines the thought, religion, moral and art of a given social system. Marx believed that social being is the reflection of social being, especially the material production relation. For Marx, it is the material production relation that gives birth for social consciousness. Marx and his companion Fredrick Engels incontrovertibly proved that it was not the social consciousness of that determined their being, but, on the contrary, the social being and, above all, the production of material values that determined social consciousness and that social development depended on material causes and not on peoples' ideas, wishes, or intentions (Theodor: 19). Life is not determined by consciousness, says Marx, instead consciousness is determined by life. For Marx, the history of human social development is governed by general laws of dialectics. For him, human development is not arbitrary that moves upward or downward haphazardly, rather it conforms to certain laws of dialectics which are said to be universal and necessary. The philosophy of Marx is, therefore, dialectical materialism which proceeds from two important premises (a) the know ability of the world- the world is governed by fixed set of universal laws; and through the aid of the human mind we can disclose these laws about reality (Afanasyev, 1980). Among others, the following three laws can be mentioned: the law of the unity and conflict of opposites, the law of the passage of qualitative changes, the law of the negation of the negation (b) the objectivity of matter- it recognizes that the world exists 'out there' independently of our consciousness.

Marx philosophy is, therefore, dialectical materialism. It is materialist because in solving the fundamental question of philosophy; it proceeds from the premise that matter, being is primary and

consciousness is secondary. Marx philosophy is also dialectical because it examines the material world in constant motion, development and regeneration (Ibid). According to Marx, dialectical materialism is a science that disclosed the general laws for human social development. The laws of dialectics are somehow distinct from the other laws that we know in natural sciences like biology, physics, chemistry and others in a sense it studies general laws that regulates all spheres of reality. Consequently, dialectical materialism is:

A science which on the basis of a materialist solution of the fundamental question of philosophy discloses the more general, dialectical laws of the development of the revolutionary transformation (Afanasyev,1980)

The word "dialectics" is of ancient Greek origin, initially it is meant the ability to conduct disputes and bring out the truth by disclosing and resolving contradictions in the arguments of the opponents (Ibid). drawing on scientific and society's practical experience, at all stages of history, dialectics maintains that the world is an endless process of movement, regeneration, the demise of the old and the birth of the new (ibid). Furthermore, dialectics views the internal contradictions inherent in objects and phenomena as a source of motion and development.

Indeed, the two concepts, i.e. dialectics and materialism were not the inventions of Karl Marx. These two concepts had been developed by his predecessors Hegel and Feuerbach respectively. In other words, this is to say that the direct theoretical sources of Marx philosophy were the philosophy of Hegel and Feuerbach. It is from Hegel that Marx borrowed the idea of dialectics. Hegel was an objective idealist. He believed that the word was created by the superhuman, objectively existing consciousness- absolute idea and world history (Afanasyev, 1980). Hegel evolved the basic laws of dialectics governing the development of ideas and thoughts. He showed that the development of history(ideas) didn't follow a closed circuit, but rose from lower to higher forms, that qualitative changes turn in to qualitative one in this; process and that conditions were the source of development (Kevin:23).

Marx was also highly influenced by the thought of Feuerbach who was a materialist and rejected idealism and religion. Feuerbach was critical of Hegel's idealism and he argued that philosophy should not be confined to thought alone and; it had to study nature and man (Afanasyev, 1980). Nature, he maintained that existed outside of man (the objectivity of matter), it was the first underived being. As regards man, he was a part of nature, a product of its long evolution. For Feuerbach being is primary which determines our consciousness. Accordingly, Marx brought the idea of dialectics from Hegel and the idea of materialism from Feuerbach and he made a synthesis

of these two concepts, so that he comes up with the notion of dialectical materialism.

PART TWO

Marx Morality

The very idea of Marx's morality is closely connected with the relation between social consciousness and social being. As I have pointed out earlier social consciousness is the product of social being, that is secondary, derived from material production relations. It is in social being, the material productive activity of people that we should look for the source of their ideas, theories and views (Theodore:120). This is to say, in other words, as morality is a reflection of social consciousness which is ultimately derived its character from /material production relation. Because of this Marx argues:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently, also controls the means of material production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more the ideal expression of the dominant material relations. The dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance (quoted in Kellner, 2004).

For Marx, there is no philosophical idea which is completely detached from the economic source of society; and it is because of this Marx criticized the moral theories that had been expounded by his predecessors. Marx contends that there is no any idea, religion or morality which springs from pure consciousness without material intercourse. He argued that those moral theorists who have formulated universal principles of conduct are under "false consciousness"; in a sense they mistakenly believe that their ideas and principles are purely derived from their mind. They all are not well aware of the fact that ideas and philosophical systems are embedded on material production. Because of this reason, Marx argues that there is no any formal, abstract moral principle which is derived from pure reason, free from any material production as Kant's categorical Imperative and utilitarian's' did, which according to Marx, is a specific form of ideology.

As compared with those classical and contemporary moral theories, demanding a normative ethical principle that guides the actions of individuals, Marx morality is thought to be descriptive. This is simply to say that in Marx morality there is no sharp distinction between value and fact and the 'is' and the 'ought'. Thus, as Duglas Kellner pointed out, 'Marx doesn't "solve" the problems of traditional or

contemporary moral theory, rather, he tends to ignore them and develops his moral critique and theory on an anthropological and practico-political plan'.

Equipped with his dialectical materialism and the analysis of the sever working conditions of the proletariats, Marx posed a strong criticism against the exploitative nature of the capitalist system; and the moral ideas and principles inherent within it as 'ideology' in a sense they are claimed to be eternal, unchanging and universal. However, Marx claims, all values are reflections of a certain form of social existence and express certain needs or class interest (Keller, 2004). For instance, bourgeoisie morality serves the class interest of the bourgeoisie and their social needs. Morality can have said to be ideology if the values oppress and inhibit, rather than fulfill and enhance, human needs and potentialities. The moral ideas and principles in a capitalist system, Marx claims, are against the interests of the proletariats and even dehumanize them. They are values that inhibit the development of human species, instead of fulfilling and promoting human needs and potentialities. This arguably is the case with repressive sexual morality, with patriarchy, with the capitalist work ethic, and other ideologies and blocks the satisfaction of human needs (Keller, 2004).

Here, I would argue that the attempt made by Marx to build up a different sort of morality under socialism, which enables to promote the welfare and needs of men must be appreciated. Marx truly conceptualized how and why the ruling class having the dominant means of production take ideas for their own advantage by reducing workers to the level of 'slaves'-exploitation. This can be seen somehow in connection with Marx concept of alienation.

Indeed, the concept of alienation was first used by Hegel, in a dialectical fashion. But it was Marx who gave a materialistic interpretation of the Hegelian moral concept of alienation to conceptualize the sufferings of the working class in a capitalist system. For Marx, productive activity is a distinctive feature of human beings which makes them different from other animals, in a sense the quality of our life is dependent upon the quality of work that we engage in (Theodore: 121). Because of this reason production activity is not only that sustains our life, but also shapes our identity. but this can only be fulfilled when the social conditions in which what the workers' produces are the expression of their own ideas and aspirations. In capitalist system workers are alienated from their products. Products are not expressions of the identity and pride of the producer, rather it is taken away from them and become 'externalize' from the producer. The capitalist system epitomizes alienated labor because the workers produce commodities for someone else are given a bare subsistence (Teodore:120). Indeed, workers are not only alienated from their products but also alienated from

their fellow workers as well as from themselves in a capitalist system.

Under capitalism labor is not something which comes naturally as part of self-expression, but is something which is intensely disliked and only performed in order to get money to live. Yet creative labor is deeply ingrained urge in man...an indispensable part of this development. Capitalism denies the workers the self-expression through labor. It substitutes self-destruction through labor. As man's need for self-expression is suppressed, he feels himself 'alienated' from his own existence (Kevin:32)

Marx fully conceptualized the harsh living conditions of the working class in a capitalist system and ultimately calls for social revolution to change the social condition in which the interest of people is served. In my opinion the very purpose of morality should be to work out guiding principles which show how people ought to live in a society peacefully equally and fairly without any subordination and exploitation of man by man. When Marx ethics is viewed from this angle, it could be said important to alleviate the social evils that exist in a society as a result of peoples' social relationship.

The intensity of the misery and exploitation of the working class is also explained by Marx concept of surplus value. What capitalists buy from the workers is their labor-that is, their capacity to work-but not their output. If the finished product didn't exceed the cost of the workers' livelihood, the capitalist would not have any motive to hire them (Theodore:119). The workers sell their labor in order to have their subsistence, so that the relation of production in a capitalist system tend to be more profitable for the capitalist than the proletariat. In other words, workers are paid the value of their labor, but they produce more value than the capitalist obtains. The more the workers produce, the more they become poor.

CONCLUSION

Consistent with the materialist interpretation of history, Marx ruthless objection of any form of abstraction is manifested in his ethical conception. It is due to his objection towards any form of abstraction that Marx gave emphasis to the concretely existing individuals in their particular circumstances. This should be, according to Marx, a departure point for any philosophical as well as scientific inquiry. He denounced any attempt to discern men in abstraction, apart from their particular social roles, status, and class position. Marx's insistence on the concretely existing individuals has implication on his concept of human nature. For him, man has no fixed and enduring essence which transcends historical and economic horizon in which men live. This is to say that man is not always the product of his own choice nor wholly determined by

the external world. Rather men's essence is continually changing as a result of his dialectical interaction with the environment. By considering human essence as the ensemble of social relations, Marx, therefore, shattered the attempt to base morality on a fixed enduring human nature to be disclosed by pure reason. It is because of this that Marx opposed Kant's abstract formulation of 'respect the person' as a genuine moral percept worthy of appreciation.

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