

# Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker

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The question which Brian Wicker poses to Denys Turner—how is Marxism to accommodate the notion of ethical absolutes?—is clearly one of first importance to those who, like Denys Turner and myself, would regard themselves as both Christians and Marxists. I don't think I can give any satisfactory answer to Wicker's question, but I can perhaps at least prepare the context for such an answer by making some general remarks about the relations between Marxism and morality. In doing so, incidentally, I shall be elaborating on Turner's own truly pioneering earlier article in this journal, 'Morality is Marxism' (*New Blackfriars*, February and March 1973).

The question of the relevance of moral values to Marxism is at the heart of one of the most theoretically crucial debates now being conducted within European Marxism: the conflict between those revolutionary theorists for whom Marxism is in essence a *humanism*—an historical *praxis* of love and liberation—and those for whom historical materialism is in the first place a *science*. The adherents of the former position espouse a Marxism deeply indebted to Hegel and the work of the young Marx; the latter believe that such a case is no more than an idealist *ideology* of historical materialism, and claim to be restoring Marxism, after this long twentieth-century heresy, on the truly scientific basis to be found in the mature Marx of *Capital*. The debate—one, roughly, between the followers of Georg Lukács and the disciples of the most prominent European Marxist theorist of our own time, Louis Althusser—has created a good deal of dust and heat among revolutionary intellectuals.

For the Lukácsians, there is an essential continuity between the work of the early, humanist Marx and the later scientist of *Capital*; for the Althusserians, there is radical rupture and discontinuity between the two phases. Take, for instance, the question of the status within Marx's work of the apparently crucial concept of *alienation*—a key-stone of the ethical and 'humanist' reading of Marx. For the Lukácsians, alienation continues to operate as a profoundly significant category throughout Marx's work, thus providing one anchorage of his scientific analysis in a persisting ethical humanism; for the Althusserians, the concept of alienation is an ideological rather than scientific one, belonging to an early residually Feuerbachian Marx who has yet to break fully from an idealist anthropology to historical science. From this latter

standpoint, alienation belongs as a concept to an essentialist, unhistorical and unmaterialist notion of human 'species-being', which is what, under capitalism, is alienated from the 'individual'; and in that sense the whole of this discourse is too close to talk of an absolute human nature to be compatible with historical materialism.

One kind of Marxist, then, could construct some kind of answer to Wicker's question about ethical absolutes by holding to this early Marxist discourse and attempting to derive from it some sort of philosophical anthropology—some Marxist view of 'man' which would operate in the ethical sphere as a kind of absolute touchstone. If he did so he would clearly be open to the charge of not being a Marxist at all but a materialistically-minded Hegelian; and yet the alternative position—that Marxism is primarily a science of social formations, a theory of social contradictions and of the practice of their historical unlocking—seems to leave the question of moral value hanging impotently in the air. It seems, indeed, to reproduce precisely the deviations of those Second International theorists for whom Marxism was a science in a positivistically-conceived sense, and who therefore, bereft of a moral 'dimension', had incongruous resort to a brand of neo-Kantianism from which to derive their moral imperatives. (I'm not suggesting that Althusser himself is in the least a positivist, just that his case, when vulgarised by his epigones, can lapse into precisely that error.)

My own view of the debate about the status of alienation in Marx's work is that both Lukácsians and Althusserians are wrong. It is true neither that 'alienation' as a category evaporates from Marx's work (as anyone who has read the very mature work *Theories of Surplus Value* can see at a glance), nor that alienation *in the sense in which the early Marx uses it* persists. What does happen, I would suggest, is that an initial, *ideological* concept of alienation, in Marx's early work, is transformed later into a *scientific* category. I believe the Althusserians are correct in identifying the early idea of alienation as an essentialist, idealist one, and that any attempt to derive ethical absolutes from the discourse in which this concept is embedded is un-Marxist. But by the time of *The German Ideology*, Marx is using the concept of alienation in a scientific manner—using it to denote, not the estrangement of the 'individual subject' from his 'species-being', but the objective, historical mechanisms of the divorce of the proletariat from the mode of production. It is not that the concept has ceased to be 'moral', but that the meaning of 'morality' has been transformed—returned to its proper basis in a scientific analysis of the historical facts.

It is here that Denys Turner's earlier article, 'Morality is Marxism', is of central importance. For Turner rightly, and brilliantly, sees that Marxism is a morality in the classical sense of that term just in so far as it refuses the kind of dichotomy of fact and value which bedevils the Lukács-Althusser contention. Morality, as Turner comments, poses the question: How are we to act, given the facts?; and the point about Marxist theory is that it is constituted quite consciously on the basis of such a nexus between 'fact' and 'value'. No one was more aware than Marx, confronted as he was by that 'ideologue of the bourgeois revolu-

tion' Emmanuel Kant, of the ideological significance of the fact/value dichotomy; the question is, how did Marx attempt to transcend it?

Let us take the concrete instance of Marx's theory of exploitation, in volume 1 of *Capital*. When Marx lays bare, for the first time in history, the precise mechanisms whereby surplus-value is extracted from labour-power in bourgeois society, is he performing a 'scientific' or a 'moral' task? Well, it certainly isn't a 'moral' operation in the sense that Marx is asking us to cry out with horror at the bestialities of capitalism (as he does, incidentally, in the passionate indignation of some other chapters of that volume). 'Exploitation' doesn't mean 'denying the dignity of the human being', or some such formula; it has an exact, scientific application to a particular social mechanism. Feudal serfs were certainly denied their dignity, but it is meaningless to describe them as 'exploited' (in terms of the theory of surplus-value), just as it is in Marxist terms appropriate in a certain sense to speak of slave-society as 'progressive'. And that Marx isn't asking us to cry out in horror is obvious enough in the fact that it would be perfectly possible to bring someone to an understanding of the Marxist theory of exploitation and still get the response: So what? Having absorbed the explanation of how surplus-value is produced by capitalism, you could still quite consistently stroll back to your factory and continue the efficient exploitation of your work-force. There are certainly men on the *Financial Times* with an impeccable understanding and endorsement of the theory of surplus-value; but it doesn't lead them to change their ways and move to the *Socialist Worker*, because it isn't a moral theory *in that sense*. It is a description of the true facts, but a description with no inherent impulsion to move your behaviour this way or that.

Is Marx, then, after all, merely a positivist, and morality just a question of the private attitude you take up to his scientific analysis? No, because the moral significance of the theory of exploitation can only be revealed by re-inserting this particular concept into the matrix of Marx's revolutionary theory as a whole. Marxism isn't 'about' exploitation or surplus-value; the founding, primary concept of historical materialism is *the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production*. The theory of surplus-value merely instructs us in the ways in which that contradiction operates in a particular phase of class-society, capitalism. The 'moral' meaning of Marxism lies in the significance of the contradiction I have just mentioned; it's to this that we have to address ourselves.

In a striking phrase, Marx writes in *The German Ideology* that 'every development of a productive force is a development of the capacities of men'. For Marx, in other words, the very concept of a productive force is itself a crucial nexus of the unity of 'fact' and 'value'; he speaks elsewhere, indeed, of men themselves as constituting a productive force. The plot-line which historical materialism traces is the story of how, in its process of development, a mode of production must logically generate the fatal contradictions which obstruct its own further evolution, and so obstruct the further evolution of the capacities of men. It's because those obstacles are structural and inherent, rather than random and

fortuitous, that Marxism can properly constitute itself as a *science* of history. But why should it bother with such contradictions in the first place? Why shouldn't a man, confronted with such an analysis as he was confronted with the theory of surplus-value, merely reply, So what?

The essence of 'Marxist morality' is that, for Marx, this would not in fact be possible. It would in his view be at the deepest level self-contradictory for a man who genuinely grasped the truth that history was blocking the development of human capacities to acquiesce in that situation, for he would in this sense be denying his own nature. What distinguishes men from the other animals, for Marx, isn't that they have some ideal, absolute capacity which can be fulfilled, but simply that they are capacity-producing and reproducing creatures. That is so, fundamentally, because of the structure of their bodies: it is because men are the animals who (in the precise sense Marx gives the term) can *labour* that they are what they are. Only an animal with an opposing thumb could possibly be spoken of as having a soul.<sup>1</sup> For Marx, labour is certainly a trans-historical absolute, and he explicitly says so; which is to say that what is 'absolute' for Marx about men is that they consistently produce and reproduce their living capacities in the process of reproducing their material life.

Which, of course, is in one sense to say very little, and in another sense to say far too much. It says too little because, as it stands, it merely repeats the stale formulae of conventional historicism: the nature of man is culture. It says too much because it seems to assume that the fulfilling of each and every historically produced capacity is a good; and it is here that Brian Wicker's implicit question—by what criteria do we decide between capacities, between the capacity to torture the hungry or to feed them?—comes directly into play. Nevertheless, it does say something, and something important. For the *specificity* of historical materialism isn't that 'men create their own history', or that they are 'radically historical' beings, statements with which many reactionary idealists could concur. The specificity of the doctrine lies in the nexus it affirms between the production of human capacities and the production of material life: in the statement that 'every development of a productive force is a development of the capacities of men'. What Marx says about the historical development of the human senses—that only with the *objective* (i.e. material, productive) unfolding of history can 'the richness of subjective *human* sensibility' be unfolded too—applies for him to all human capacities. That, if you like, is Marx's 'moral position'.

It is not a position which should be treated undialectically, as I believe Brian Wicker does when he raises the point that for Marxism moral values are 'radically conditional on the historical situation of the material base'. 'Moral values', in the sense of specific moral doctrines and attitudes, are certainly for Marx part of the ethical region of ideology; but this is to imply that the 'material base' is then merely an

<sup>1</sup>Cf. 'Anima est in determinato corpore, cum non videatur anima accipere quodcumque corpus contingat, sed determinatum'. Aquinas. *In De Anima* 11.4 § 277 (Editor).

objective, amoral 'thing', to define it in economic or technologic terms as a bundle of productive forces, rather than as a particular *social* organisation of those forces which produces and is produced by living human capacities. In that sense, 'morality' for Marxism, in the traditional meaning to which Denys Turner recalls us, is first of all a matter of the 'material base'—of the way human productive capacities are actually organised and distributed, of the *real* condition and state of development of those capacities, which is then cloaked and mystified at the ideological level of a society's 'morals'.

There is another undialectical interpretation to which Marxist morality is open, and that is to conceive of it as some crude ethical progressivism. This would amount to saying that men get better and better as they get (collectively) richer and richer—that it's only *possible* to be truly 'moral' in a society which has unshackled itself from the dead-weight of inhibited productive forces. But Marx makes no such naive one-to-one relation between the state of men's mode of production and the state of their souls, just as he makes no such naive relation between the stage of development of a mode of production and the state of men's artistic creation. The ancient Greeks, he argues in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, were able to produce unsurpassed art precisely because of the relatively undeveloped state of their mode of production. This applies to 'morality' too. Obviously there are good men in materially underdeveloped societies; but a Christian would surely want thoroughly to endorse the whole point which 'Marxist morality' is enforcing, that loving behaviour in violent societies is admirable not least because of its extreme difficulty. In that simple sense, I believe there is no division between Christian and Marxist moralist: we both believe that, in order to love truly, we have to abolish the historical contradictions which now prevent us from doing so.

Even so, this leaves unanswered Wicker's question about moral absolutes—leaves Marxist morality saying far too much, in its apparently indiscriminate rubber-stamping of each and every human capacity. I don't really know how to answer this, as I said at the outset; it just does seem to me that, if some sort of philosophical anthropology is indeed recoverable from Marx's work, it is one which will need to fight hard to differentiate itself from some form of ethical naturalism. But let me at least attempt one rather circuitous and shaky response, from a Marxist viewpoint, to Wicker's point about the absolute evil of torture. How would a Marxist approach the issue? I think an interesting (and relatively novel) starting-point is to be found in the interplay of two categories which absolutely dominate the whole of Marx's work: the categories of *abstract* and *concrete*. In *Capital* and elsewhere, these categories are the lynchpins of Marx's precise scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production: they underpin at every point his discussion of commodities, use-values and exchange-values, the objective relations of social classes to the means of production, the character of the labour-process, the structures of scientific analysis and a good deal more. Yet they are, inseparably, 'moral' categories too; for Marx's scientific deployment of these concepts would be unintelligible, I be-

lieve, if we were to overlook their moral force, their locus within some kind of implicit anthropology. For Marx, it just is the case that the abstraction and estrangement of the concrete use-values and sensuous qualities of things is at once a scientifically dissectable structure of capitalist production, part of its objective mode of functioning, and simultaneously a stunting of human capacities. Basing himself upon a dialectical materialist view of men, Marx contrasts that sensuous relation to the concrete use-value of an object (which is one starting-point of such materialism) with that reciprocal abstracting of both the object and the living powers of its owner or producer which is enforced by commodity production and exchange-value. It is not a question of arbitrarily legislating that 'concrete' is good and 'abstract' bad—'abstract', like much else in capitalism, has certainly been good in its day, furthering the release of productive forces and so of human capacities. But neither is the issue thereby reduced to mere historical relativism; for Marx certainly seems to hold that the form of relationship to an object which respects its concrete use-value is in some sense *normative*—a relation to be derived from the very standpoint of materialism itself, one rooted in the very nature of the human animal. I'm not suggesting that this viewpoint can then be mechanically translated to that abstractive violation of the sensuous life of men which we call torture, or that Marx's 'normativeness' is equivalent to the absolutism of the Christian prohibition. But I am suggesting that there is latent in Marxism a materialist theory of morality which is not only one the Christian would want to endorse, but one which is urgently needed if we are to distinguish absolute prohibitions from arbitrary legislations.

There is a final point to be made about the question of how we decide between this capacity and another, which may well seem a way of evading the issue. It isn't often realised what an exceedingly modest enterprise the Marxist one is. Marxism is a theory of historical contradictions and of the practice of resolving them; and as such it belongs, as Marx says, not to history but to pre-history. All Marxism tries to do is to get us to the point where we can start history—start living. In that sense it is, ironically, a negative kind of project; the only good reason for being a Marxist is to get to the point where you can stop being one. The committed Christian hopes to sustain his faith until he dies; the committed Marxist hopes to be able to jettison it long before he dies. This difference between Christianity and Marxism seems to me one reason why Marxism has little to say about 'morality' *directly*: it is silent because the material conditions which would make such discourse possible do not yet fully exist. Christians believe this too, but they also believe that because of the resurrection of Jesus it isn't the whole truth; because Jesus lived and is now alive, the conditions for such discourse are, in some mysterious way, even now available. Marx's relative silence on the issue of 'morality' seems to me a form of witness comparable in character to Jesus's silence before Pilate: you don't engage in 'moral' debate with men who can only conceive of morality moralistically. It is in the silence of those who refuse to speak 'morally' that the true meaning of morality is articulated.