

Marxist Critique of Morality

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Abstract:

Marxist Critique of Morality challenges the idea that moral principles are timeless, universal, or unaffected by social circumstances by examining morality from a historical and materialist perspective. The paper makes the case that moral systems arise from particular material relations and serve specific class interests within a certain mode of production, drawing on the tenets of Marxist theory. The Marxist perspective places morality into the larger framework of power and economic relations rather than seeing it as an independent area of human existence.

The essay examines how prevailing moral standards frequently serve ideological purposes, justifying current social structures and forms of exploitation. It is demonstrated that ideas like justice, obligation, and freedom represent the ideals of the ruling class, portraying historically contingent relationships as normal or ethically required.

The article emphasizes that Marxism does not dismiss moral concern but rather criticizes its abstract and mystifying forms by making a distinction between intellectual morality and the ethical impulses resulting from the collective human struggle against oppression.

The paper explores the philosophical conflict between materialist analysis and moral critique, asking whether Marxism itself requires a moral stance. It implies that Marxist criticism works by highlighting the inconsistencies and inequities ingrained in social interactions rather than just moral condemnation.

In the end, the article makes the case that true moral reform is inextricably linked to social and economic change, claiming that emancipation necessitates the restructuring of material circumstances rather than depending solely on moral principles divorced from historical reality.

Keywords: Marxism, Morality, Ideology, Class Relations, Historical Materialism

INTRODUCTION

As social animals we live in a society and adopt some standards or rules or principles of action in order to regulate and organise social relations or society. It is true that we are not the only animals with such preferences, since a number of animals live in organised habitats. However, man is distinguishable in this respect from other animals in the complexity and intricacies in the organisation it lives in. The adopted rules or principles of behaviour become our conventions, which are informal public systems. However, these conventions or informal public systems are not static; they change according to the needs of the society in course of time. These conventions of conduct governing our behaviour become the basis of moral discourse and depicted as code of conduct.

In turn, morality is typically viewed as the standard that separates right from wrong and good from poor action. This criterion creates the potential for a coherent set of principles or ideals. This system visualises and seeks to approximate to the ideal. Ideals can originate from both inside and outside of

society. The latter is the idea that a non-worldly entity, such as God or another similar authority, is in charge of morality and is present in all theistic religions. Such religious control has been abandoned as a result of society's secularisation, and an endeavour has been made to establish a coherent set of values or principles that are either directly or indirectly, expressly or implicitly, connected to human endeavours. However, the idea of the interests or obligations of some individual or group of individuals in the society being served and its standardisation of interpersonal conduct within the society cannot be disregarded in the emphasis placed on human endeavour to develop or evolve morality or a code of conduct. To put it another way, it is sometimes asserted that morality originates and is sanctioned by society and serves as a guide to satisfy the needs of an individual or a group of people. It uses these widely accepted social norms or principles as a measure to assess good or undesirable behaviour.

Classical philosophy and biology regarded homo-sapiens or human beings as superior to all other living and non-living existents in the physical cosmos. The philosophically assumed homocentric view remained un-interrogated in the antiquity, which considered men as the centre of the universe irrespective of whether he existed individually or in a small or large group, societies or social networks. The dominant homocentric orientation pervaded the theoretical and practical aspects, that is, the conceptual and empirical representations of life.

The un-interrogated homocentric view coupled with the concern or pretension to human welfare relegated and regulated human social relations to prescribed quasi-transcendentals - the norms, conventions and rules. This embedded the assertion that all value flowed from or centred on human existence, that is, human purposes, needs and satisfactions, which then became the organising principles of society or groups. Conduct or influence on conduct came to be understood to fall in the domain of 'morality'. It appears that with the passage of time conventional rules or norms started to gravitate around the term 'morality'. The gravitation compelled philosophers to construct various definitions of the term.

Morality Concept

The term 'morality' in the Oxford Dictionary lexically defines as the principle of distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, behaviour and a system of values or principles of conduct. However, mere lexical meaning is not sufficient, for the word 'moral' does not only mean 'morally right' or 'morally wrong' but goes beyond the simple demarcation of right and wrong to place it into the complexity of morality that has a paradigmatic configuration. When we discuss the morality of an activity, for example, the term is sometimes employed just as a polar idea to immorality and as a means of rectifying behaviour. This difference is obliterated because of certain features morality shares with conventions and law. Frankena lays down three expressions of morality in terms of forms of judgment, "...certain forms of judgment in which particular objects are said to have or not to have a certain moral quality, obligation, or responsibility...some rules, principles, ideals and virtues that can be expressed in more general judgments and that form the background against which particular judgments are made and reasons given for them...certain sanctions, or additional sources of motivation that are also often expressed in verbal judgments, namely, holding responsible, praising, and blaming..."¹

One may tend to agree with Frankena on the specific characteristics attached to morality. There is therefore an emphasis on the 'rule-function' of morality at the cost of ignoring its function of achieving ideals. A distinct analysis of morality may require it to be characterised by its function, the natural preference for it in society and obviously the prevalent moral sentiments. Moral judgments are

concerned with reason, in the sense of cause, or aim, that is, motive, not only because it indicates the propensity of an action to encourage good or evil, but also because this is where praise and condemnation can be useful in changing a person's behaviour.

The use of terms 'right' and 'wrong' usually qualify actions that may or may not be acceptable, depending on the prevalent standards of behavior, which should not be understood to be static. The dynamics of establishing these prevalent standards depend on the need of the day with ever changing conditions. The prevalent standards have impacted and impact the moral discourse of the time. However, it may be clarified that 'right' and 'wrong' are not synonyms of 'good' and 'bad'. The term 'good' signifies a positive evaluation, whereas 'right' indicates a conduct accepted, authorised or sanctioned according to a particular system of morality.

Marxist View on Morality

Human life would be boring if we all draw the same line and go through the same road then there is no disagreement and ultimately nothing for the human social development. Criticism and disagreement are constructive or investigation is welcomed provided it opens up personal puzzle or frustrated behavior.

The most popularly held critique of morality is that of the Marxist that employs description of consequences or danger of capitalism and its antagonistic, oppressive and exploitative nature to characterise morality. Marxist critique of morality is one of the controversial issues in ethical history. They have critiqued morality and preferred scientific approach employing language to describe the pitfalls of capitalism and its antagonistic, oppressive and exploitative nature. They showed through a study of sociology of morality that it is a tool to maintain status quo of the social order. The Marxists club morality as part of ideology which is basically an illusion or false consciousness.

Marxism as a method or theory understands the world in order to change it. The Marxists most distinctive position is that the issues and characteristics of the pure philosophy, that is questions of epistemology and ontology, are not so much problems to be solved as indicators of a depression or alienation i.e. the indifference to life.²

Morality is the practice of doing, acting, and behaving as social significance only inside the social context, according to one's beliefs about what is good and right. Morality is a system of moral guidelines, precepts, or standards that direct behaviour. Like, Gert argues, "Morality is a public system...governing behaviour which affects others..."³ Therefore, morality directly serves practice granted that it must have an objective explanation where the individuals or groups depend on what their life and activities are.

Morality may reveal or express humanity's inner or hidden view, where Ferm stated, "One should not suppose that philosophic speculation created the moral problem as a historical event. On the contrary, the moral situation is as old as man."⁴ The Marxist view is that morality evolves in a way that people acquire their sense of morality intentionally or unintentionally from the living relations in society. In this sense Engel's argues, "Men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their moral ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based – from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange."⁵

In order to clarify morality, it is possible to attribute moral principles to the people they serve. Marxists who viewed morality as the result of class interests revived this well-known theory. According to Engels, class morality has always been and always must be the foundation of all morality. "It has either justified the domination and interests of the ruling class, or, as soon as the oppressed class becomes powerful

enough, it has represented the revolt against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed.”⁶ Lukes claims that morality is a kind of ideology that is class-serving, illusory in content, and social in origin. He rejects all moral vocabulary as outdated and argues that any unique morality that arises from a particular stage in the development of the creative forces and relations is in opposition to all moralising. However, the critique of both capitalism and political economy is not moral but scientific.⁷ Morality is mostly seen through the lens of class and ideology. Engels discussed morality in terms of bourgeois prejudices that conceal bourgeois concerns for the working class. Marx developed his idea of false consciousness and applied it to criticise certain moral stances rather than morality in general. According to Lenin, morality is portrayed as the perspective of impartial, independent well-wishers. Later, Lukacs adopted the idea of impartial charity and asserted that it could not be achieved as long as there was class struggle stemming from class oppression. According to Marx and Engels, morality, religion, and all other ideologies no longer appear to be independent. Men have no history or growth, but as their material output and interactions increase, they alter not only their actual world but also their thoughts and the outcomes of those thoughts.⁸ Marxists attempt to eradicate religion because they see it as "the opium of the people"—that is, because it upholds a "bourgeois" morality that denounces the systematic dishonesty, lying, betrayal, lack of control, elimination, violation, civil war, and murder that they see as essential to overthrowing or defeating capitalism.) Marx's view is, "To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusion about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions."⁹ Lukacs argues, "...the ultimate objective of communism is the construction of a society in which freedom of morality will take the place ... in the regulation of all behaviour."¹⁰ Because there are disparities in the moral world as well, we reject any attempt to impose on us any moral dogma as an everlasting, final, and unchallengeable ethical norm. Society divided into classes because of morality and is certainly of a class character, which justifies and strengthens the domination and each class developed its own moral standards and morality. Given that morality is predicated on the material circumstances of human existence, and the antagonistic classes have completely opposite conditions, then it is natural that these classes have different ideas of good and bad, justice and injustice. This class character of morality is needed by the historical conditions. The dominant class sets the standards of morality in keeping with the rule and interests of their class and makes every effort to impose them upon the other classes. The exploited or proletariat class has its own basis of morality. This morality comes into clash with the dominant morality, with its own moral principles, demands, and desires and this is reproduced in their protest against the exploiting system, the capitalist or bourgeoisie class. However, Engels notes that up until now, all moral conceptions have ultimately resulted from the social and economic circumstances that prevailed at the time. Furthermore, morality has always been based on social class due to the way society has developed towards class conflict thus far.¹¹ The prevailing morality of the capitalist class in a capitalist society is economically supported by the private ownership of the means of production. Capitalists would commit crimes and transgress all human moral standards in their pursuit of profit. Private property relations undermined moral principles like selflessness and honesty, and dishonesty, cunning, and desire took centre stage. Lenin contends that in a society where all incentives for theft have been eliminated. How the preacher of morality who made

a sincere attempt to proclaim the timeless truth—that one should not steal—would be ridiculed. Only in a society with private property does this moral precept make sense.¹²

Trotsky concurs that "morality is a function of the class struggle" and a byproduct of social growth; that morality has a class character more than any other type of ideology, and that there is nothing unassailable about it that advances opposing social interests. Even while there are a few fundamental moral principles that have been developed throughout human history and are crucial to the existence of all collective bodies, their influence is incredibly limited and erratic. Morality's "obligatory" standards are actually rife with class, or hostile content. According to Trotsky, moral judgements and political judgements stem from the internal demands of struggle.¹³

Since morality is socially and historically conditioned, Marxists reject idealism and subjectivism in morality. They maintain that it is pointless to try to define morality without considering its determination by social factors. The materialist view of history is in contrast with idealism which is why Marx and Engels argue that their method, "...does not explain practice from idea, but explains the formation of ideas from material practice."¹⁴

Marxists considers the main criterion of morality as compliance to the rules of evolution of society. They contend that what is progressive is good and ethically acceptable, and that what is historically required is progressive. They contend that because socialism is both a progressive system and a historical necessity, a person's moral character is determined by how much they have contributed to the fight for socialism. There are no absolute and universally applicable moral standards; hence it is even worse for ideals if they conflict with the demands of historical necessity. Values are established by connecting them to advancements in society.

Lenin argues, "We say that our morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of the proletariat's class struggle...Morality is what serves to destroy the old exploiting society and to unite all the working people around the proletariat, which is building up a new, a communist society...To a communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters. We do not believe in an eternal morality, and we expose the falseness of all the fables about morality."¹⁵

Marxists hold that every moral concept and system has a particular historical background and is peculiar to a given type of society. Therefore, man's existence in nature and society is the source of morality. Here Marx and Engels argue, "The communists do not preach morality at all. They do not put to people the moral demand. Love one another, do not be egoists..."¹⁶ Therefore, Engel's argues, "A really human morality which stands above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life."¹⁷

According to Lukes, the universal obstacles to emancipation are identified by the essence of morality; these barriers are social and historical rather than psychological and anthropological, and they can be found in social structure and history rather than in human nature or human interaction processes.¹⁸

Post-Modern Morality Concept

The other prominent and more recent critique has come from the postmodernist condemning all effort to absolutise and has in turn created the cult of relativeness engulfing all spheres of life, including morality. Therefore, any claim to moral certainty turns paradoxical, controversial and even contradictory. In this sense, Taylor and Winqvist argue, "Postmodernism advocates moral relativism...that moral beliefs, values, and practices vary from culture to culture, from time period to time period and perhaps even from situation to situation...There is not a consistent postmodernist prescription for the state of moral

relativism; however...postmodernist challenges to philosophical ethics do not stop us from asking...how to live, and why...".¹⁹

Conversely, Bauman contends that postmodernity is a "era of morality" in that moral selves perceive activities as matters of responsible choice and, ultimately, moral principles and accountability.²⁰ Therefore in the postmodern condition our morality is determined by what feels right and works for the individual. There is no central absolute standard in order to judge. As a result, in the postmodern era, morality is based on personal preference and what seems appropriate. There isn't a single, unchanging criterion by which to judge. The postmodernist thesis is sometimes argued to be an extreme form of individualism arising out of liberal political philosophy.

Post-Marxist View

The Post-Marxist view is that morality includes the basic norms of human conduct which the general masses develop and change in order to fight against the wickedness and social oppression. The fundamental norms of human morality are not conduct of any particular class reflecting the historic conditions of production, but it is human product reflecting the universal aspirations of man from which we together constitute the just and reasonable foundation of human morality.

Morality is springing from values and values are changing from time to time for the need of human social development, leading to behaviour. The rich list of universal values that cannot be separated from morality includes love for humanity, respect and regard for human life, human dignity and honour, individual rights and freedom, and personality as a social and moral value. The two essential bounds of these ideals that demonstrate the simplicity and significance of morality are the person and humanity. Morality is clearly independent of universal values, not the other way around. This fact explains why universal principles are so important in today's world. Without reflecting and realising universal values, morality could not grow.

CONCLUSION

Marxists move to critiquing of morality in condemning capitalist moral ideology as intelligible, if not entirely insignificant. Their approach is that criticizing the existing ideology (morality) is sufficient remedy for the social development. The view of morality lies in, appreciating that socialism and communism represents a form of social existence that is morally superior to capitalism, whose advantage consist in the fact that it has gone beyond morality.

Marxist morality includes the fundamental standards of human morality that the masses of people can evolve over millennia as they struggle against evil and social injustice. The "fair foundation" of human morality is made up of human products that reflect the universal aspirations of man, not class products that reflect the historical conditions of production.

Islam argues that ideology is shown to include morality, "...is consistent understanding of...a discourse, be that philosophical (political) or economical, which is historically evolved and serves the purpose of concealing the contradictory social relations, which are the relations of domination."²¹ But an adequate assessment seems to require an evaluation of the logic of moral discourse common to its founders.

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