

ON READING MARX AS NON-COGNITIVIST AND AMORALIST

I

Richard Miller in his important Analyzing Marx takes it that Marx rejects morality as a humane basis for resolving political conflicts or assessing social institutions or practices.¹ In doing this Marx, he claims, rejects something Miller takes to be essential to morality, namely that there are norms that anyone will be committed to "who rationally reflects on appropriate arguments, accepts relevant factual claims, and possesses the normal range of emotions". (43) In our class-divided societies, he claims, there is too much cultural diversity to expect such consensus. "Different people attach different importance to rival goods, as important for themselves and for others -- say, competitive striving as against cooperation, material income as against leisure". (43) Rational persuasion, Miller argues, will not bring about agreement here. Across cultural space and historical time there are vast differences in human response as to how it is appropriate to live.(44)

In medieval Europe, everyone gave customary restrictions and obligations of kinship great moral weight, much more so than in the present day. It simply is not true that all intelligent normal modern people, aware of relevant facts and arguments, accept the earlier rules as morally valid in their respective settings. Nor is it true that ignorance or unreason were the basis for the older views. That Aristotle would have changed his mind about slavery if he had appreciated some fact or argument does not fit what we know about Aristotle and his contemporaries.
(44)

From considerations like this Miller, surprisingly I think, attributes a meta-ethical view to Marx. He reads Marx, without any textual evidence, as being "an implicit non-cognitivist.." (44) By this he means, again rather surprisingly, that "various central issues of social choice cannot be resolved, in his view, by the use of reason and evidence."¹² (44) That alleged non-cognitivist stance is not based, as one would expect, "on any alleged general distinction between moral discourse and statements of fact." (44) The basis for what he takes to be Marx's implicit meta-ethic is the belief that for some moral judgements, though not for all, there is no agreed factual basis for those judgements. That is there is no fact of the matter -- or so Miller claims -- that makes them true or false. Where certain moral arguments get resolutely pushed it will become apparent that our very fundamental moral commitments are non-rational. (44) If this were not so, Miller argues, Marx's "attacks on morality would be utterly unfair. For his arguments against utilitarianism depend on the denial that relevant disagreements over goals can always be resolved by rational means." (44-5)

II

It is not that Marx does not engage in argument in reasoned discourse to justify political choices. The claim isn't that he just gives expression to his feelings. His putative non-cognitivism, no more than Charles Stevenson's or Axel Hagerstrom's genuine non-cognitivism, does not rule out such arguments. (45) But it does mean, Miller claims, that his arguments "are not addressed to an universal audience, though they are addressed to a very large one." (45) Marx assumes that his intended audience will have rather similar initial sympathies and reflective desires to his own. That is Marx's expectation. He thinks that people, with such desires and sympathies, "will be persuaded by the facts he

advances." (45) But he does not believe that this will be true of all rational informed human beings.

Miller then asks us to consider, if we find this a tenuous basis for a life devoted to public argument, can we find stronger grounds for our own commitments? Miller thinks we would not be able to find such grounds.(45)

Marx assumes -- I think not implausibly -- that people will think that it is wrong to oppress workers, to exploit them, to make children work so that with the long drudgery of their labour and with little in the way of education they become dulled and stunted beings. People, including capitalists, capable of moral response, only accept such situations as morally tolerable if they believe that if they were not so tolerated things would be still worse. Marx writes with the not unreasonable expectation that people will find these things bad and will at best accept them as necessary evils. If someone's attitudes are such that just flat out he cannot see anything wrong with stunting the growth of children, exploiting people or oppressing them, then, Marx realizes, there is not much by way of argument he, or anyone can make to such person. It is, however, at least plausible to surmise and hypothesize that people do not have such beliefs at least not just like that without some racial or class bias generating allegedly factual beliefs which will enable them to rationalize such treatment. But, if they really do, if they really just have them neat witout some factual rationalization, there is very little more that can be said by way of argument. Any proposition designed to show that oppressing people is evil is likely to have an either lesser justificatory weight or at least no greater justificatory weight than that proposition itself. Still, in not sharing Marx's attitudes and the attitudes of most of us here, it does not follow that such an outsider must be irrational, ill-informed or that we can

show that his choices are irrational. There may not, with such immorality, be any falling off in rationality.³ Moreover, it is not at all clear that there is any fact of the matter that can be appealed to that will show this outsider to be in any cognitive way mistaken. Non-cognitivism, Miller argues, explains why this should be so.

As I remarked, I do not think there is much of a textual basis to attribute such a non-cognitivist view to Marx or for that matter a cognitivist moral realist view either. But I do think that such a minimal non-cognitivism is at least plausible. Indeed, I am sometimes inclined toward it, and I think it would not be unreasonable for a Marxist to adopt it. But -- and this is the more vital point for our present argument -- I do not see how accepting non-cognitivism entails or anyway requires the rejection of morality or the moral point of view. Non-cognitivism, a meta-ethical view, does not add up to amorality. This, I think, can be seen even from the way Miller characterizes the universal rationality that is essential for morality. He said, as I in part quoted at the beginning, that believers in morality hold that moral "norms are ... accepted by anyone who rationally reflects on appropriate arguments, accepts relevant factual claims, and possesses the normal range of emotions." [(43) italics mine] However, by including in this characterization of a feature essential for believing in morals, the "possessing the normal range of emotions", he can non-arbitrarily rule out people who find nothing wrong at all in oppression, exploitation and stunting child labor. Hume and Westermarck, as well as Stevenson and Hagerstrom, are not implausibly construed as non-cognitivists. Yet all three of these philosophers could and would accept that characterization of a feature of the moral point of view. Hume, as did Adam Smith and Edward Westermarck as well, thought that we -- that is people generally -- have

natural sympathies that do not allow us to remain indifferent to suffering, except where we are blocked for particular people or groups of people by powerful ideological pressures of prejudices. We have to convince ourselves by some form of rationalization that some hated race or ethnic group is scarcely human before we can in good conscience so distance ourselves from their suffering. Hagerstrom and Stevenson were more concerned with conceptual issues than Hume, Smith or Westermarck, but they make such assumptions as well, though they are more inclined to think that is a matter for psychological comment than for philosophical comment.

So someone who seriously asks, flat out and means it, what is so bad about unnecessary suffering, is beyond the moral net: he simply does not possess "the normal range of emotions" that go with taking the moral point of view. In arguing within morality we do not have to defend ourselves from persons who are simply indifferent to morality any more than to reason scientifically we have to defend ourselves from those who would reject all scientific canons.⁴ In reasoning morally we can safely assume that normal range of emotions Miller refers to. The having of them is partially definitive of what it is to take the moral point of view. Someone who does not reason in accordance with them is not reasoning morally.

III

When Marx makes arguments concerning the political choices to be made he has, as an intended audience, those who have those emotions and the beliefs normally associated with these emotions. But in so arguing, on Miller's own characterization, Marx should be seen as arguing within morality not, as Miller avers, as rejecting morality. That these emotions are normally in place is presupposed when we reason morally.

Given that normal range of expected emotions, Marx believes that under certain circumstances we can use objective political arguments to justify certain political choices. Given those emotions, and the pro and con attitudes that go with them, certain facts come to have a certain relevance and wight they would not otherwise have.⁵ Moreover, there will along with this, be a recognition of the relevance of a careful marshalling of a social scientific theory which perspicuously represents the facts and makes it plain that there are possibilities that would not otherwise be noted or duly considered. There will also be a persistent critique of ideology to strike against ideological mystification. All these things are very much needed in political argument to justify certain political choices. But this is not the rejecting of morality or even the overlooking of morality but a reasoning under the moral net and indeed the moral net as Miller characterizes it. (43-45)

There are, of course, as Miller notes, sharp conflicts over values both in our own societies and between us and people distant from us historically and culturally. But it is crucial to try to ascertain the causes of these differences. It would seem to me more reasonable to expect, and it would seem to me a Marxist would expect, that the differences would turn more on different ideological conceptions of what the world is like, what people are like, how societies function, what can come to be the case and the like, than of their being different moral conceptions. One can, at least for people touched by modernity, safely assume that oppression is bad, that suffering is bad, that breaking faith with others and the like is bad. It is not over these matters that people are set against each other.

Against this, the following objection comes trippingly on the tongue: am I not, in making the above remarks, failing to face the really deep

historical and cultural differences between peoples that Miller notes and that should be evident to informed reflection? Aristotle, to understate it, was no mean intellect. Yet he believed that some human beings are natural slaves. Miller does not think there is some fact of the matter that we, standing on Aristotle's shoulders, know that Aristotle did not that would have, had he been aware of it, changed his mind. There are just deep reletivities in human moral belief and conception that thwart claims to universal rationality in those domains.

IV

I do not see how Miller can be so confident that we are such prisoners of our ethnocentric moral beliefs and conceptualizations of the world. Indeed it seems to me quite improbable. Aristotle believed that there were not inconsiderable differences between Greeks and barbarians and that the barbarians were good candidates for being natural slaves, for among other things they did not speak Greek. He assumed, in assuming that, that Greek was conceptually more adequate language than 'barbarian' languages. But if Aristotle could have known what contemporary linguists know it is hardly plausible that a person of his intellect would have continued to believe that about languages. Some languages for various reasons have a more limited vocabulary than other languages. Contemporary Danish, for example, has fewer adjectives than contemporary English. But it still has the resources, through cultural borrowing and the like, to indefinitely add to its vocabulary as do all languages. There are available the syntactic and semantical resources to at least indirectly express in any language what can be expressed in any other language. We have no good grounds for thinking that there are intrinsically inferior or superior languages.

So what other reasons would Aristotle have for thinking there are natural slaves? Perhaps the intellectual incapacities and lack of drive of some as opposed to others? But here we would have to rehearse all the old considerations that with us have by now become platitudes : we look for the causes of such general differences in different cultural and class backgrounds with their attendant differences in opportunities in education and leisure and the like. Isn't it these that are more likely to produce the significant differences than the natural differences rooted in our individual biologies and the biologies of distinct groups of people?

Couldn't Aristotle just hold up with the belief, differences in early socialization notwithstanding, that some people are just naturally dumber than others? Here, among other things, he would have to face Adam Smith's contrary claims about different socialization and the deeper challenges by Noam Chomsky and others that we have no general criteria for deciding what intelligence is or even a sufficiently perspicuous concept here to give us a sense of where to look.⁶ What we have is a bunch of diverse abilities and skills, acquired in different ways, in which people differ very considerably : some people are very verbal and hardly numerate others just the reverse. Someone adept at literary criticism may be at a complete loss with algebra and vice-versa. Why assume that an able garage mechanic who can quickly diagnose and fix what is wrong with an engine is either more or less intelligent than a philosopher who writes astute essays on the nature of moral belief? It is questionable whether we have any reliable general conceptions of what intelligent is and it is almost certain that we do not have a conception that is not culture and class skewed and that has sorted out the nature/nurture problem.⁷

However, suppose that we did have such criteria and that such criteria were useful in determining who are to get scholarships, who will get in the law school or to graduate school and the like. Still, it is a very long way indeed from there to saying that some people are natural slaves incapable of running their own lives, taking part in political decisions about the society in which they live and are only fit to serve others. Perhaps people can be made into such people but there is no reason to think that they are by nature such people -- people who are -- by nature slaves or that there is a group, some race or ethnic group, who are natural slaves. By now we have the empirical and conceptual resources to prove to Aristotle, if he were here, that, that is indeed so. And if Aristotle were not convinced (something which I think is very unlikely) I do not see that we cannot establish quite objectively, that all the same, he is mistaken and that, by an appeal to the facts of the matter, and not by an appeal to what may be essentially contested moral concepts. Miller's claim is without warrant that we have nothing to say to Aristotle that would justify our claim that it is false that some groups of people are natural slaves. To think that we are so stuck here seems to me to be a rather un-Marxian and un-empirical failure of nerve.

Indeed Miller's own refusal to make Marx's case for non-cognitivism turn on an is/ought distinction or on some other allegedly logical distinction between moral discourse and factual discourse should give one pause. In arguing morally and politically, it is an open question, he avers, "just how far the limits of reason extend, just how many judgements are affected" by Marx's alleged "implicit non-cognitivism". (44) But why then is he so confident that we would just run out of reasons in arguing with Aristotle or with (say) the medieval Norse king Harold with his different conception of the claims of kinship, so that

finally we should just run up against different forms of life which are just there like our lives and cannot be argued about? Perhaps such Kuhnian or Wittgensteinian incommensurability claims obtain, but there is no reason to think that Marx thought so and their paradoxicality turns the burden of proof on the person who would defend them. Perhaps at some point we just come up against non-rational moral commitments where no further argument or appeal to evidence is possible, but Miller has not shown where that point is or that we can expect to find such a point and not having shown those things, he has not, of course, shown that it at the point where we try morally to justify social institutions. This being so he has not made out a good case for Marx's non-cognitivism or his rejection, in the domain of the political, or for that matter anywhere else, of morality.

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NOTES

1. Richard Miller, Analyzing Marx (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1984). All references to Miller's Analyzing Marx will be given in the text.
2. I think this reveals more about the pervasiveness of ideology in morality than anything about meta-ethics.
3. Kai Nielsen, "Why should I be Moral Revisited?" Methodos, Vol.XV (1963) and "Why should I be Moral Revisited," American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January 1984), pp. 81-92.

4. Stephen Toulmin, An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press 1950), pp. 121-165.
5. Andrew Collier, "Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values" in Marx and Morality (Guelph, ON: Canadian Association for Publishing in Philosophy 1981), pp. 155-170 and his "Positive Values," The Aristotelian Society Proceedings Supplementary Volume VII (1983).
6. Andrew Hacker, "Creating American Inequality," The New York Review of Books, Vol. 27, No.4 (March 20, 1980), pp. 26-28. Noam Chomsky, For Reasons of State, (London, England: Fontana Books 1973). pp. 104-150. See, as well, his "The Case Against B.F. Skinner," The New York Review of Books Vol. 17 (December 30, 1971), pp. 16-24.
7. On nature/nuture see P.B. Medawar, "Unnatural Science," The New York Review of Books Vo. 24, No. 1 (February 3, 1977), pp. 13-4.

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