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Marxism, 'Ideology,' and Moral Objectivism¹

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For most of this century, it has been taken for granted that the theoretical commitments of Marxism are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with any kind of objectivism in ethics, whether realist or constructivist.² Commentators in the analytic tradition who have argued for this anti-objectivist interpretation have categorized Marx variously as a noncognitivist (moral judgments are not actually propositional, and so are neither true nor false),³ a sort of 'error theorist' (moral judgments are all

1 I would like to acknowledge the support of the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago.

2 There is, unfortunately, considerable variation in the terminology used by moral philosophers to discuss these issues: contrast, for example, David Brink's characterization of 'realism' as a meta-ethical theory 'committed to moral facts and truths that are *objective* in some way,' 'independent of the evidence for them' (and thus *excluding* moral constructivism and relativism), with Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's more latitudinarian conception of 'realism' as just successful cognitivism, '*not solely the prerogative of objectivists*' (and thus *including* moral constructivism and relativism). See David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 14, 17-18; and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, Introduction to Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1988), 5, 16. To eliminate ambiguity, I will henceforth use 'objectivism' stipulatively to include both realism (in Brink's sense) and constructivism (idealized intersubjectivist cognitivism). Theories in the opposing, *anti-objectivist* camp would therefore include moral nihilism, noncognitivism (emotivism, prescriptivism), error theories, individual subjectivism, and ethical relativism. For our purposes, though, the important meta-ethical contrast is simply that between the umbrella positions of objectivism and anti-objectivism.

3 See, for example, Donald Clark Hodges, 'Historical Materialism in Ethics,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23 (1962) 1-22.

false),⁴ or an ethical relativist (moral judgments are true/false relative to class or the mode of production).⁵ Other commentators, less charitable in their assessment, have found Marx to be irredeemably confused and inconsistent in his moral pronouncements, espousing not a consistent anti-objectivism, but rather simultaneously proclaiming the class-relativity *and* the objectivity of morality.⁶

In recent years, however — as a product both of the restoration of respectability to the notion of realism in ethics and the exponential growth of Anglo-American philosophical interest in Marxist theory over the last decade and a half — there have been an increasing number of attempts to represent Marx as an ethical objectivist.⁷ Such an enterprise faces many hurdles, though none is necessarily insuperable: Marx's apparently negative attitude towards morality in general, as revealed in numerous passages in his writings; the destructive implications for the sphere of personal responsibility of what is sometimes construed as an inevitabilist theory of history; the difficulty of reconciling moral universalism with the reality of a class-divided society; the putative dependency on the mode of production of the validity of juridical ethical concepts in particular, such as justice; and the presumably anti-objectivist conception of morality implied by Marx's categorizing it as 'ideology.'

It is with the last of these that I am concerned in this paper, though what I have to say will also have implications for some of the other issues. I have developed elsewhere a revisionary conception of what Marx and

4 See, for example, Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984) and Anthony Skillen, *Ruling Illusions: Philosophy and the Social Order* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1978).

5 For an interpretation of Marx as a global relativist, see Milton Fisk, *Ethics and Society: A Marxist Interpretation of Value* (New York: New York University Press 1980). George G. Brenkert, by contrast, defends a position which could be characterized as *partial* relativism, since he sees Marx as a historical relativist for some ethical values (such as justice), but not for others (such as freedom). See George G. Brenkert, 'Freedom and Private Property in Marx,' in Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon, eds., *Marx, Justice, and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980) 80-105, and also his *Marx's Ethics of Freedom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1983). Steven Lukes takes a somewhat similar line in his *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985).

6 See, for example, H.B. Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch: Marxism-Leninism as a Philosophical Creed* (London: Cohen & West 1955) and Eugene Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics* (London: Macmillan 1969).

7 See, for example, Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View: Morality, Ideology, and Historical Materialism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1989).

Engels really meant by 'ideology,' that I believe to have repercussions for this debate.⁸ My claim is that my new reading (a) significantly weakens the case for the anti-objectivist, or meta-ethically inconsistent, interpretations of Marx, insofar as that case rests crucially or partially on the standard view of 'ideology'; (b) clears a conceptual space for the objectivist interpretation in a more convincing way than its defenders have usually done; and (c) constitutes additional support for the long-standing alternative theory of pro-objectivists that the real target of Marx's hostility was 'moralism' rather than 'morality.' As such, it helps to bolster the argument for viewing Marx as a moral objectivist whose real criticism of morality was not that it was cognitively void but that it was causally secondary.

I

The standard argument that anti- and pro-objectivists either employ or must grapple with can be simply expressed as follows: P1: For Marx, all morality is 'ideology.' P2: 'Ideology' is a pejorative term in historical materialism, denoting illusory ideas of some sort. Therefore: Morality for Marx is itself illusory and cannot have the kind of cognitivist bite that moral objectivists want to attribute to it.

Anti-objectivists, pro-objectivists, and those who see Marx as simply inconsistent, have generally interpreted P1 as a meta-ethical statement about the metaphysics of value, and, correspondingly, about the truth/falsity of moral propositions.⁹ Depending on the particular kind of illusion 'ideology' is supposed to involve, anti-objectivists have then read Marx as endorsing the view either that moral judgments are neither true nor false, or that they are all false, or that they are true/false relative

8 My argument is developed in the following papers: Charles W. Mills, "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels," *The Philosophical Forum* 16 (1985) 327-46; Charles W. Mills and Danny Goldstick, "A New Old Meaning of 'Ideology,'" *Dialogue* 28 (1989) 417-32; Charles W. Mills, "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels" Revisited and Revised," *The Philosophical Forum* 23 (1992) 301-28. Since I do not believe that Marx and Engels diverged theoretically on either the meaning of 'ideology' or the status of 'morality,' I will refer indifferently throughout to Marx/Engels.

9 One important exception is Ziyad Husami's 'Marx on Distributive Justice,' a reply to Allen Wood's 'The Marxian Critique of Justice,' both anthologized in Cohen, et al., eds., *Marx, Justice, and History*, 42-79 and 3-41. In my opinion, Husami's claims about the real significance for Marx of the 'ideological' nature of morality have received insufficient attention in the secondary literature. This paper is in part intended to retrieve, supplement, and develop his interpretation.

to class/the mode of production. Similarly, commentators who see Marx as inconsistent have pointed to the contradiction between these views (morality as illusory) and the explicit or implicit objectivism they find elsewhere, whether in (putatively) overt meta-ethical pronouncements or in what seem to be clearly *moral* denunciations of capitalism.

In response, pro-objectivists who confront this argument¹⁰ have tried to deal with it in three main ways, two ways of challenging P1 and one way of challenging P2: (i) strategy S1, the claim that Marx's views on 'ideology' apply only to some kinds of moral *concepts* and not to others;¹¹ (ii) strategy S2, the claim that Marx's views on 'ideology' apply only to the morality of some *classes* and not to others;¹² (iii) strategy S3, the claim that the standard *interpretation* of 'ideology' is mistaken, so that being 'ideological' does not necessarily entail meta-ethical anti-objectivism.¹³

Now each of these strategies faces particular problems of its own.

The basic problem with S1, as critics have pointed out, is that since Marx and Engels explicitly characterize *all* morality as 'ideological,' there seems no good reason for thinking that some moral concepts are exempt. It is true that in the case of juridical concepts, such as 'justice' and 'rights,' this negative conclusion is, so to speak, overdetermined, since not only are they ideological, but they also form part of the juridical superstructure of capitalism, thereby being (arguably) mode-of-production relative also. Nevertheless, the fact remains that other moral values, such as 'freedom/emancipation' (the most popular candidate), are also ideological concepts. As Norman Geras says, simply and surely correctly: 'To the extent that Marx does postulate an ideological limitation or relativity of values, his theory of ideology is perfectly general in its reach, encompassing every sort of normative concept and not only ideas about justice.'¹⁴

Like S1, S2 is handicapped to begin with by the embarrassing fact of running directly counter to what Marx and Engels say (i.e. that the morality of *all* classes is 'ideological'). Moreover, where S1 at least has

10 It should be noted, of course, that some philosophers have defended an objectivist view of Marx's meta-ethics while simply *bypassing* the question of how this is to be reconciled with his apparent views on morality and 'ideology.'

11 This is basically the solution of Brenkert and Lukes.

12 This is one of two approaches taken by Nielsen.

13 This is the second approach taken by Nielsen, and also the one taken by Husami.

14 Norman Geras, 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice,' in Alex Callinicos, ed., *Marxist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), 232

some independent textual evidence for positing a distinction between the juridical and the non-juridical, S2 is, for the skeptical critic, likely to seem simply question-begging in its salvaging of *proletarian* morality from the unhappy realm of the ideological.

Strategy S3 is, in my opinion, the most promising approach, and this paper offers a variant of it (distinguished from others, as we will see, by my denial that P1 is about the truth-values of ethical propositions in the first place). The problem S3 faces is in specifying the nature of the reconceptualization involved, defending it, and then showing how it is theoretically pertinent. I think there are three main possibilities. In decreasing order of defensibility, they are: (a) an alternative interpretation of the *actual textual evidence*, viz. reconceiving what Marx and Engels actually said about 'ideology'; (b) a reconstruction from the general theoretical commitments of historical materialism of what Marx's concept of ideology *should have been*; (c) a *stipulative* definition of a useful conception of ideology. I describe the order as 'decreasing' not because of any reverential bibliocentrism, but because in a debate over what *Marx's* views on morality and ideology were, the fact that a conception of ideology *different* from his own would have no anti-objectivist implications is of questionable relevance. Since the stumbling-block for pro-objectivists is the necessarily illusory character of 'ideology' for *Marx*, the desired solution is a convincing reconceptualization which either justifies the exclusion of this feature in a non-circular way, on *independent* textual grounds, or shows why the 'illusion' is not destructive for the truth-content of morality.

Those who take the former route could, for example, follow the precedent set by Joseph McCarney, the most active defender of the neutral interpretation of 'ideology,' who characterizes 'ideology' simply with reference to its role in the class struggle (i.e. as partisan class ideas), while denying that Marx intended any *epistemic* judgment to follow from this.¹⁵ On such a view, obviously, the meta-ethical problem simply disappears, since if 'ideology' is epistemically neutral, the categorization of morality as 'ideology' has *no* negative implications for the truth-value

15 See Joseph McCarney, *The Real World of Ideology* (Brighton, Sussex and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Harvester and Humanities Press 1980), and "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels": A Reply,' *The Philosophical Forum* 21 (1990) 451-62, a reply to my 1985 paper. Nielsen cites McCarney as his main authority for the neutral interpretation. Note, though, that while the neutral conception of 'ideology' makes an objectivist view of morality *possible*, it does not, of course, require it, since, as indicated at the beginning of the paper, there are other reasons for thinking Marx would have been anti-objectivist. For McCarney's own position on these matters, see his recent 'Marx and Justice Again,' *New Left Review* 195 (1992) 29-36.

of moral statements. The statement that 'capitalism is just/unjust' can therefore *both* be an objectively true moral judgment (consistent with its being meta-ethically objectivist) *and* play an ideationally socially-mobilizing role in the class struggle (consistent with its being 'ideological').

However, as I have argued elsewhere (see n.8, above), this conception of ideology cannot survive a detailed examination of the texts, so that the objectivity of morality cannot be saved by this route. My own solution to reconciling objectivism with morality's being 'ideology' rests, as I indicated at the beginning, on a radically divergent conception of the *denotation* of the term, and, consequently, on a different assessment of what P1 and P2 commit Marx to. (For me, unlike for McCarney, the epistemic characterization of the ideational sense of the term remains negative, but the *reference* shifts.) Since my reconceptualization is of type (a), it is arguably less vulnerable to the accusations of irrelevance, fuzzy criteria for assessment, or question-begging, that (b)- and (c)-type candidates face. I think that 'ideology' has two organically linked senses, *neither* of which coincides with either of the two main contenders in the secondary literature, generally illusory partisan class ideas or epistemically neutral partisan class ideas. The primitive sense (whose textual appearances are rare) is *non-ideational*, and neutral, referring to the 'superstructure' as a whole. The other, derivative sense (the one that dominates Marx and Engels's writings) *is* ideational, and pejorative, but it refers not to illusory ideas in general, but to 'superstructuralist' views in particular.¹⁶ For me, then, 'ideology' in the ideational sense is indeed illusory (so P2 *is* true for this sense), but the illusion is specific and, where morality is concerned, is located at a level other than that of the moral judgments themselves. 'Ideology' is a pejorative meta-theoretical term for theories which aggrandize the causal power of the superstructure. Accordingly, I would argue that P1 is a meta-ethical statement not in the narrow sense conventionally presupposed by rival sides in the debate, as pertaining to the truth-values of ethical propositions, but in the different, and broader, sense of locating morality as a social phenomenon which, for Marx and Engels, characteristically misunderstands its own

16 The significant degree of overlap with the conventional interpretation of the term, which is *also* ideational and pejorative, partially accounts, in my opinion, for the fact that its real meaning has not generally been discerned. What commentators who have taken 'ideology' to be a *global* pejorative Marxist term for mystification have failed to notice is that Marx never categorizes 'fetishism,' his primary polemical target in the economic writings, as 'ideology.' On the standard interpretation this is quite puzzling, but on my reading it is simply enough explained: fetishism is *not* a variety of idealism/superstructuralism, but rather a kind of vulgar materialism.

genesis, is unrealistic about its psychological capacity to motivate, correspondingly inflates its causal significance, and thus systematically over-estimates its actual ability to transform the socio-economic order. *In categorizing morality as 'ideology,' Marx and Engels are treating it as being a descriptive theory (or at least as having an auxiliary set of implicit empirical assumptions) about how society works and how it can be changed.*

Since this analysis will be an unfamiliar one, let me go into some more detail. My suggestion is basically that Marx and Engels are assuming that in making a moral judgment, M (e.g. capitalism is just/unjust), moralists (whether conservative or revolutionary) are characteristically committed to a set of meta-ethical propositions, M', about M and its relation to society, having to do not with its truth-value but its origins and the causal efficaciousness of its pronouncement. These meta-theoretical assumptions are all predicated on a *superstructuralist* view of social causality, and as such are all 'ideological' and false. But the truth/falsity of M' is obviously *separable* from the truth/falsity of M. So one can consistently endorse ethical objectivism (the objective truth/falsity of M), while denying the truth of M'. The 'illusion' of morality (the 'illusion' referred to in P2), then, consists in these meta-theoretical and causal claims rather than the non-objectivity of 'capitalism is just/unjust' — an illusion not about the truth-values of ethical judgments, but about their causal etiology and prescriptive efficaciousness. It is preeminently *this* that the 'ideological' characterization is meant to convey. If I am right, the debate in the secondary literature has been significantly off-course from the beginning because of an initially mistaken conception of what 'ideology' meant for Marx and Engels.

II

I will now try to make a case for these claims. There is, of course, no room to give a textual defense of my revisionary interpretation of 'ideology' itself — readers are simply referred to the sources in the notes — but I do at least want to sketch a theoretical context that should help to make it plausible.

The crucial focus for my argument is Marx and Engels's view of social causality. They had a deterministic view of social evolution, but their determinism was of the kind that would today be categorized as 'compatibilist.' In other words, they recognized a realm of human freedom, but saw it as consisting not in the break with causality (as metaphysical libertarians would hold), but in the overcoming of *coercive* causation. What distinguishes their view from ordinary compatibilism, of course, is a holistic rather than individualist perspective, and a substantive theory ('historical materialism') about a putative *hierarchy* of social cau-

sation and the most important coercive causes. They saw a fundamental categorical divide running through the realm of the social, on one side of which lay the technological and economic interaction of human beings with nature and with each other, and on the other side of which lay people's juridico-political systems and moral and ideational frameworks. The causal asymmetry between the two, the structural constraint of the latter by the former, is, of course, the famous ('materialist') thesis which the 'base-superstructure' metaphor is intended to capture and summarize. The claim is that techno-economic causes (designated as 'material') are the most important shapers of macro-patterns of socio-historical development, so that, within the topography of the metaphor, historical materialism has to be demarcated both from theories privileging variables 'below' ('vulgar' / *unhistorical* materialism, e.g. naturalistic determinisms of a geographical or biological sort) and from theories privileging variables 'above' (*non-materialist* superstructuralist theories, e.g. juridico-political, cultural, ideational determinisms).

What has not always been noticed is that the appropriation of the language of ontology ('materialism') to designate a methodological/sociological position was consistently extended to the *competing* set of theories: 'idealism.' Since this overlap of terminology can initially be a bit confusing, let me set out the four pertinent pairs:

THE IDEAL/MATERIAL

Ontological senses:

Ideal = mental and ideational

Material = physical

Ontological idealism = universe as composed of minds and ideas

Ontological materialism = universe as composed of physical entities

Sociological senses:

Ideal = superstructural

Material = economic and/or natural

Sociological idealism = social determination exclusively/primarily by superstructural causes

Sociological materialism = social determination exclusively/primarily by economic and/or natural causes¹⁷

17 For a more detailed discussion of the issue, see my 'Is it Immaterial that there's a "Material" in "Historical Materialism"?' *Inquiry* 32 (1989) 323-42.

Marx and Engels were both ontological and sociological materialists.¹⁸ Now if you have such a theory of the dynamics of the social system, it means that your view of social possibilities, and the means to their realization, is obviously going to be different from the view of those who either *deny* any asymmetry (repudiating *both* materialism and idealism and asserting instead a rough parity of causal efficaciousness), or, even more dramatically divergent, the view of those who see the asymmetry tilted in the *opposite*, 'superstructural/ideal' direction. In the language of analytic philosophy: the conjunction of necessary conditions which jointly suffice to bring about major social change will, for Marx and Engels, be radically differentiated internally according to the degree of difficulty in manipulating its components, and at the most refractory end of this spectrum will be conditions involving the overcoming of natural necessity and oppressive economic structures (the 'material'). These should therefore be our primary object of focus. But sociological idealists, proponents of the primacy of *superstructural* causation, deny this.

Against this background, the logic of my reconceptualization ('ideology' as [1] the ideal superstructure, and [2] superstructuralism/idealism) may now seem somewhat clearer and more persuasive. To begin with, as a matter of *etymology*, 'ideology' as 'sociological idealism/superstructuralism' derives from 'ideology' as the 'ideal superstructure,' since the former implies a (mistaken) belief in the causal primacy of the latter. But in addition, as a matter of *fact* (so Marx and Engels claimed), ideologies (idealist theories) tend to be produced by those who work in the ideal superstructure. One of the basic themes of *The German Ideology* is the pernicious cognitive consequences of the division of mental and material labor, as a result of which some people came to specialize in 'ideal/superstructural' labor ('ideologists'), thereby naturally tending to exaggerate the causal significance and explanatory power of the 'ideological/superstructural' products with which they were professionally engaged (ideas, laws, politics), and thus becoming prone to 'idealism/superstructuralism' — 'ideology' in the derivative ideational sense. *The German Ideology* is, inter alia, a critique (in the sense of an attack *and* an explanation) of this phenomenon. 'Ideology' in the derivative ideational sense — sociological idealism — is the methodological error of 'turning things upside-down,' 'inverting' the actual (materialist) societal causal hierarchy, by ignoring altogether, or at least downplaying, the role of 'material' economic factors in social change, thereby grossly

18 Note that the two positions are logically independent, since one could believe that ideas are brain events (ontological materialism) while endorsing a view of history as determined by the battle of ideas (sociological idealism).

exaggerating the causal efficaciousness of superstructural changes that are unaccompanied by base/economic ones.

The point is, then, that even with the best will in the world, one will not be able to bring about radical social change that is morally desirable in the absence of the appropriate 'material' prerequisites. Marx and Engels's hostility to 'morality,' and their categorizing of it as 'ideology,' are, in my opinion, simply part of their *general* opposition to the idealistic sociological assumptions of the most prominent reformers of the time (for example, their rivals the utopian socialists), that voluntarized social causality, ignored or minimized natural and class constraints, and unrealistically expanded the room for prescriptive transformation. On the macro-level, social transformation requires technological prerequisites and appropriate class agents, and on the micro-level, people's psychologies are shaped by class society, so that the human 'will' is not floating freely, able to assume any desired direction in response to a moral categorical imperative, but oriented in characteristic directions, angled towards the magnetic pole of material structures. But traditional morality is a set of action-guiding prescriptions about duty, virtue, and justice: what kinds of deeds we should perform, what kinds of characters we should try to develop, what kinds of societies we should strive to build. Since 'ought implies can,' these prescriptions imply a certain estimate of individual and social possibilities. Absent the appropriate enabling material conditions, however, such exhortations are, in Marx and Engels's opinion, likely to be futile. Insofar as morality as a whole tends to neglect these conditions, it could be regarded as 'idealistic' and as assuming an 'idealistic' conception of the will. Instead one needs to focus one's theoretical attention on the material conditions which will be necessary for the complex conjunct of variables to become jointly sufficient for change, thereby making possible the 'can' which gives point to uttering the 'ought.'

III

Let me now try to demonstrate the textual support for the causal reading¹⁹ by showing both the ubiquity of causal claims in Marx and Engels's discussions of morality, and the connection between these claims and assertions about idealism (which for me, recall, is coextensive with the ideational sense of 'ideology').

I suggest the evidence can be perspicuously organized under the following categories, summarizing Marx and Engels's *denials* of typical M' claims: (i) morality is socially determined, linked to particular classes, not something that descends from a Platonic heaven; (ii) moral dilemmas and oppositions are historically bound and contingent, not eternal and necessary; (iii) moral preaching cannot overcome technological underdevelopment; (iv) moral preaching cannot overcome an unfavorable configuration of class forces, and people cannot voluntaristically transform their characters; (v) in the absence of these 'material' prerequisites, morality is in general 'impotent' to effect radical social change. My claim will be that Marx and Engels's judgment that morality is 'ideology' and 'ideological' (idealism/idealistic) is intended to point out moralists' characteristic *adherence* to what Marx and Engels, as 'materialists,' are denying.

(i) The first appearance of the judgment that morality is 'ideology' is in *The German Ideology*: 'Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness' (CW, 5, 36-7). The point here, clearly, is to underline, against the Young Hegelians, the derivative status of the ideational, its lack of an internal dynamic of development. But even if the superstructure is so completely determined (and this is an example of the kind of polemical overstatement Engels would later regret, and seek to redress in his expository letters of the 1890s),

19 I refer to the following sources, using these abbreviations: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers): Vol. 1 (1975) (CW, 1); Vol. 4 (1975) (CW, 4); Vol. 5 (1976) (CW, 5); Vol. 11 (1979) (CW, 11); Vol. 17 (1981) (CW, 17); Vol. 23 (1988) (CW, 23); Vol. 25 (1987) (CW, 25); Vol. 26 (1990) (CW, 26); Vol. 29 (1987) (CW, 29); Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (in one volume) (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1968) (MESW). An 'X' after the page number indicates a passage that was crossed out in the manuscript.

this does not imply that its contents, where truth-values are involved, are *false*. Causation is not incompatible with truth, and in fact in a passage from the previous paragraph that was crossed out in the manuscript, Marx and Engels say that individuals' ideas 'are the conscious expression — real or illusory — of their real relations and activities, of their production, of their intercourse' (CW, 5, 36X). So all ideas, both veridical and illusory, are materially determined, and this would be consistent with there being true as well as false moral beliefs.

Oppositional moralities, genealogically linked to subordinate classes, could therefore constitute a part of the superstructure without being cognitively compromised. But for the moralist, as Marx and Engels sees her, morality is characteristically conceived of as independent of a material genesis, as 'ideally' determined. Thus decades later, in *Anti-Dühring*, Engels describes Dühring as an 'ideologist' (read: 'idealist') because he 'constructs morality and law from the concept ... instead of from the real social relations of the people round him,' so that as a result 'while he thinks he is framing a doctrine of morals and law for all times and for all worlds, he is in fact only fashioning an image of the conservative or revolutionary tendencies of his day — an image which is distorted because it has been torn from its real basis and, like a reflection in a concave mirror, is standing on its head' (CW, 25, 89). The familiar 'inversion' metaphor recalls the imagery of *The German Ideology*, making it clear that the defining error of *idealism* is being diagnosed: *both* revolutionary and conservative morality would be idealistic, inverting the real causal order, if the material foundation of these 'tendencies' is not acknowledged. Similarly, in *The Housing Question*, having spent some pages polemicizing against theorists like Proudhon and Mülberger who invoke 'eternal justice' as a norm, Engels writes that 'justice is but the ideologised, idealized expression of the existing economic relations, now from their conservative, and now from their revolutionary angle' (CW, 23, 381). Note that, consistent with my interpretation of 'ideology,' 'ideologised' seems intended to be read as synonymous with 'idealized.' Engels's point is that idealistic moralists (a pleonasm for Marx and Engels), whether conservative or revolutionary, sever moral judgments from their material roots, for example by assuming rival conceptions of 'justice' to be independent of a socio-economic genesis.²⁰

20 Cf. Ziyad Husami: 'If the spokesmen for a class justify their views by maintaining that their moral outlook is independent of historical development or of class interests, then they maintain false beliefs about their morality. Such false beliefs are called "ideological illusions." The moral outlook itself, on that count alone, is not considered illusory' (48).

(ii) Because of this lack of insight into its own materialist genealogy, moral theory also typically absolutizes and eternalizes moral dilemmas and oppositions that are actually *contingently* rooted in specific historical situations, configurations of possibilities determined by the existing socio-economic structure. Thus in a famous passage on Max Stirner, often cited as evidence of their moral nihilism, Marx and Engels say that 'the communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism, nor do they express this contradiction theoretically either in its sentimental or in its highflown ideological form; they rather demonstrate its material source, with which it disappears of itself. The communists do not preach *morality* at all...' (CW, 5, 247). Again, I would argue that a sympathetic reading, which makes allowances both for the hyperbole that characterizes the whole text and for Marx and Engels's touchingly nineteenth-century faith in technological panaceas, can rescue them from the nihilist accusation. Their point is that the opposition of egoism and altruism is not immanent in the structure of things, but a product of class society. To 'preach morality' in these circumstances (to moralize without understanding this material foundation) would be to tacitly endorse the permanence of this contradiction, when in fact it needs to be transcended by a new society in which (because of the communist cornucopia of goods) it will disappear. A purely *moral* critique, then (given their view of morality as tied to an idealist sociology), would be inadequate because it would fail to get to the root of things, the 'material source' rather than the 'highflown ideological [read: idealistic] form,' and would only address the superstructural symptom. This would be 'fight[ing] against the predicates' (CW, 5, 235-7). Similarly, in the discussion of another opposition, asceticism and enjoyment, Marx and Engels declare that once 'it became possible to criticize the conditions of production and intercourse in the hitherto existing world this shattered the basis of all morality, whether the morality of asceticism or of enjoyment' (CW, 5, 419). In general for them, 'moral dissatisfaction' is 'an ideological [read: superstructural/superstructuralist] expression of these relations themselves, which does not at all go beyond them, but belongs wholly to them' (CW, 5, 378).

(iii) Theoretically, then, the important thing is to focus on the material prerequisites for social transformation, since it is they rather than the presence or absence of suitable moral exhortations which will determine possibilities. The first important category of these is natural constraint, which can only be overcome through material technological advance: '[I]t is possible to achieve real liberation only in the real world and by real means ... slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and ... in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate

quality and quantity' (CW, 5, 38). In the absence of this technological base, the majority of humanity will be condemned to servitude, and communist revolution against class domination would just mean that 'privation, *want* is merely made general' (CW, 5, 49).

(iv) However, Marx and Engels believed, rightly or wrongly, that in the capitalism of their time, technological progress had now reached the point where nature no longer posed much of a barrier to the realization of the moral ideals of freedom and equality. More important now were the *social* obstacles: the 'material' relations of production and the constraint they exercised over social possibilities through the consolidation of vested class interests, the crystallization of class psychologies, and the shaping of the 'wills' of the human beings enmeshed in these relations. But while only the more extreme kind of idealist would think that *natural* necessity could be overcome voluntaristically, this kind of idealism — idealism about overcoming social barriers — was and continues to be the *norm* within traditional morality.

Marx and Engels can be seen as putting forward here both a sociological claim and an hypothesis in cognitive psychology: that though society is economically determined, people consistently and routinely over-estimate the degree of plasticity of the social order, because the structuring 'material' girders — the refractory skeleton of the body politic — are less empirically visible to them. Even assuming the requisite technological base, major social change will require a certain level of economic development and a favorable balance of class forces. But on the level of common sense, people tend to explain things in terms of an atomistic psychology, the presence or absence of the 'will' to do something. The 'will' then becomes the target of moral exhortation, the assumption being that with adequate persuasion it can take any object, be directed towards any goal, and is thus 'arbitrary.' Marx and Engels's view, on the other hand, is that the 'will' is merely the immediately accessible proximate cause, and that it is largely shaped, willy-nilly ('will he, nill he'), by constraining economic processes which force us to do certain things if we want to reproduce ourselves.

Thus from the time of his earliest writings, Marx warns how in social explanation 'one is all too easily tempted to overlook the *objective nature of the circumstances* and to explain everything by the *will* of the persons concerned,' whereas the 'objective standpoint' requires that we focus on the 'independent' '*circumstances* which determine the actions of private persons and individual authorities' (CW, 1, 337). In *The German Ideology*, this becomes a general anti-voluntaristic contrast between the 'will' and conditions 'independent of the will,' the former being assimilated to the category of the ideal/superstructural, the latter to the category of the material/economic, with the 'material' being causally primary. Thus Marx and Engels write that our theoretical focus should be on people 'as

they *actually* are ... as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will' (CW, 5, 35-6); they trace the theoretical ideas of the German bourgeoisie to 'material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production' (CW, 5, 195); and they emphasize that 'definite *modes of production* ... are not dependent on the will' (CW, 5, 245). Similarly, in the famous 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx talks about men entering into 'definite relations [of production] which are independent of their will' (CW, 29, 263).

Correspondingly, I think it is one of the clearest pieces of evidence in favor of my interpretation that the will *itself* (and not just *theories* about the will) is sometimes categorized by Marx and Engels as 'idealistic,' 'ideological.' This peculiar locution is obviously hard to explain on the conventional reading of 'ideology' as 'partisan class theories,' since the will itself is not a *theory*. But it is readily explicable on my interpretation, since my claim is that one sense of the ideological is the causally secondary superstructural realm of society. So to categorize the will as 'ideological/idealistic' is to indicate its position in the base/superstructure taxonomy, as an 'ideal' causal link which is *not* sufficient to bring about major social change but has to be conjoined with the (more refractory) economic necessary conditions. Theorists who impute this transformational power to it on its own are therefore operating on 'idealist/ideological/superstructuralist' assumptions, downplaying or ignoring altogether the role of material causation.

In *The Holy Family*, Marx emphasizes that 'for *real* freedom [profane socialism] demands besides the idealistic "*will*" very tangible, very material conditions' (CW, 4, 95). The polemical target here is the 'spiritual' *idealistic* socialism of Bruno Bauer, which fails to appreciate the material/economic/class barriers to radical social change. The 'materiality' of these barriers is underlined in an explicit comparison in *The German Ideology* between natural and social determinants: 'Just as the weight of [the ruling class's] bodies does not depend on their idealistic will or on their arbitrary decision, so also the fact that they enforce their own will in the form of law ... does not depend on their idealistic will' (CW, 5, 329). Similarly, in his report on the Cologne communist trial, Marx characterizes as 'idealistic instead of materialistic' the 'point of view' of those who 'regard not the real conditions but a *mere effort of will* as the driving force of the revolution' (CW, 11, 402-3). The 'will' is 'ideal,' causally subordinate, so that treating it as explanatorily self-sufficient, as an originating rather than a proximate cause, is to be guilty of *idealism* (or, given my interpretation, *ideology*). Thus in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels criticizes the 'old materialism' (eighteenth-century mechanical materialism) for its (sociologically) idealist approach to historical explanation, since it does not investigate the

'driving forces,' the 'historical causes,' which stand behind 'the many individual wills active in history': 'It takes the ideal driving forces which operate there as ultimate causes.... The inconsistency does not lie in the fact that *ideal* driving forces are recognized, but in the investigation not being carried further back from these into their motive causes' (CW, 26, 388).

Since the superstructure is juridico-political as well as ideational, there will be juridico-political forms of idealism as well as the paradigmatic ideational varieties. But what such idealist 'illusions' will all have in common is the severing of these causally subordinate superstructural realms from their material determinants, and the positing of purely or largely internalist explanations in terms of free-floating 'wills.' Thus Marx and Engels refer to 'the idealistic conception of the state, according to which it is only a matter of the will' (CW, 5, 334), 'the [juridical] illusion that law is based on the will, and indeed on the will divorced from its real basis — on *free will*' (CW, 5, 90), the 'juridical illusion, which reduces law to the mere will' (CW, 5, 91), and the 'political illusion about the domination of arbitrariness, of ideological [read: idealistically self-determining] will' (CW, 5, 335). Seeing the will as 'arbitrary,' free-floating, is characteristic of an idealist sociological world view which fails to recognize the gravitational constraint of material structures. Similarly, they criticize Kant for making 'the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeoisie into *pure* self-determinations of "*free will*," of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so convert[ing] it into purely ideological [read: idealistic] conceptual determinations and moral postulates' (CW, 5, 195). The *general* mistake the idealist makes is therefore to transform 'the idealist symptom into the material cause' (CW, 5, 136) and 'give the name of the cause to the effect' (CW, 5, 175), thereby voluntarizing the possibilities for juridico-political and moral change, instead of seeing it as subject to a dynamic which is primarily externalist rather than internalist.

My claim is, then, that Marx and Engels's indictment of morality as 'ideological' (idealistic) is merely part of their *general* critique of historical/sociological idealism, and its 'upside-down,' 'topsy-turvy' way of analyzing society. They saw moralists as typically, or even necessarily, operating with an inverted picture of social causality, which presupposed a larger role for the 'will,' and a greater latitude for social transformation as a result of superstructural causation, than in fact existed. Morality's being 'ideology' in this sense implies the idealistic belief that this particular superstructural element could causally override unfavorable material conditions, or substitute for political organization and struggle. Any approach which '[takes] consciousness alone as its point of departure, [is] bound to end in moral philosophy' (CW, 5, 366).

Moreover, their skeptical view of the restricted possibilities for radical change resulting purely from moral exhortation applies not merely to the macro-level of society but even on the *microfoundational* level of individual psychology. Moralists, say Marx and Engels, assume 'Kantian self-determinations of the will' (CW, 5, 196), and put forward 'the moral demand of [people's] changing themselves and thereby changing their society' (CW, 5, 215). So the assumption is that people can drastically alter the psychologies that have in fact crystallized in them as a result of their shaping by class society, producing a particular internal economy of desire and interest (CW, 5, 250-1). But the reality is that 'Whether a desire becomes fixed or not ... depends on ... material circumstances' (CW, 5, 255). Thus to expect people to embark upon radical behavioral change would just be an 'impotent moral injunction about self-control' (CW, 5, 255), since their psychology 'by no means depends on consciousness or "good will"' (CW, 5, 262). The communists, by contrast, recognize this causal asymmetry: 'Since they attack the material basis on which the hitherto inevitable fixedness of desires and ideas depended, the communists are the only people through whose historical activity the liquefaction of the fixed desires and ideas is in fact brought about and ceases to be an impotent moral injunction, as it was up to now with all moralists' (CW, 5, 255X).

(v) The recurrent theme in Marx and Engels's writings is therefore the 'impotence' of morality, the causal inefficaciousness of moral preaching. In *The Holy Family*, Marx says (quoting Fourier): 'Morality is "impuissance mise en action." Every time it fights a vice it is defeated' (CW, 4, 201). This is repeated in Engels's notes on Feuerbach (CW, 5, 11). In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels write that Christianity 'does not go beyond mere moral injunctions, which remain ineffective in real life' (CW, 5, 254), refer to an 'impotent moral injunction' (255), say that unless individuals' circumstances are changed, 'no moral preaching avails here' (262), counterpose 'an impotent moral injunction' to 'material forces' (342-3), and deride 'the moral postulate that competition and the relations on which it depends *should* have consequences other than those inevitably arising from them' (376) and 'the pious wish' that individuals '*should* behave in such a way ... that their behavior does not acquire independent existence as a social relationship independent of them, and that their differences from one another should not assume the material character (independent of the person) which they have assumed' (437). In *Herr Vogt*, Marx describes how 'moral indignation' 'rebounded off the realities of economic conditions' (CW, 17, 93). And in *The Housing Question*, Engels refers to 'moral sermons whose emotional effects immediately evaporate under the influence of private interest' (CW, 23, 341).

Marx and Engels would later retreat from the somewhat epiphenomenalist view of the superstructure they advanced in *The German Ideology*. And in the last few years of his life, Engels wrote a series of letters²¹ deploring the one-sidedness of his and Marx's earlier formulations, which he attributed to the context of polemical engagement with their (sociologically) idealist opponents: 'We had to emphasize the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it' (MESW, 683). In these letters, Engels explicitly repudiates monocausality (a 'meaningless, abstract, senseless' notion) and asserts a principle of multiple, but still asymmetrical, determination, which has come to be known as the thesis of the 'relative autonomy' of the superstructure.²² The idea is to affirm interaction and contributory superstructural causation while still insisting on the greater causal influence of the techno-economic.

I think this more measured judgment would hold true for their mature view of morality also (or, perhaps better, *would have held* true if, counterfactually, they had spent any significant time thinking about morality), that they could not consistently see it as 'impotent,' since 'political, juristic, philosophical theories ... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles' (MESW, 682), but they would deny its *primacy*. A moral motivation that is independent of, or actually opposed to, people's perceptions of their economic interests is never going to be a major force of social change. A few of the privileged will always be morally inspired to join the struggle of the oppressed, sometimes making considerable sacrifices in doing so, but the crucial *global* shifts in hegemonic normative structures — the dramatic transformations in the schedules of rights and liberties, the redrawing of the very boundaries of the moral community, that accompanied, say, the rise of liberalism, the end of African slavery in the New World, the spread of the women's movement — will in general have socio-economic changes and shifting power relations at their root: 'if ... morality ... come[s] into contradiction with the existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing productive forces' (CW, 5, 45). Moral critique of the existing order is a necessary part of

21 E.g. to Conrad Schmidt (Aug. 5, 1890 and Oct. 27, 1890), Joseph Bloch (Sept. 21-22, 1890), Franz Mehring (July 14, 1893), and W. Borgius (Jan. 25, 1894): (MESW, 678-80, 682-96).

22 There have been various efforts to cash out this notion, which some critics have seen as an untenable hybrid position; for an interesting, unfortunately neglected attempt in the analytic tradition, see Geoffrey Hellman, 'Historical Materialism,' in John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, eds., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy, Vol. Two: Materialism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1979) 143-70.

political struggle for radical change, but the extent to which this challenge is a success or failure will be largely determined by the extra-ideational factors that shape people's consciousness.

Nor is this judgment a bizarre one. Consider, for instance, as a paradigm example from recent global developments, the welcome political liberalization and democratization in South Africa. Was this the result of a sudden improvement in the cogency of the moral arguments against apartheid, or a dramatic removal from the Afrikaner eye of the scales that had prevented blacks from being seen as Kantian persons? Obviously not. Two generations of anti-apartheid activists, both inside and outside the country, had worked tirelessly to expose the oppressive nature of the system, and influence world opinion against it. Their information was crucial in combating the South African Government's domestic and international propaganda agencies, and providing moral ammunition for those in the West concerned about, and opposing, their governments' political, economic, and military support for the regime. To this extent, moral agitation was necessary in helping to raise consciousness. But praiseworthy though these efforts were, they would never have succeeded in transforming the sentiments of the majority of white South Africans, or in persuading foreign governments and corporations to cease temporizing and foot-dragging about effective sanctions and divestment, had it not been for other, far more important changes (in terms both of the greater difficulty of bringing them about, and their greater psychological impact). Some of these were: the defeat in the 1970s of Portuguese rule over its African colonies, which had provided South Africa with a buffer zone against hostile neighboring black states; the armed struggle of the ANC in South Africa (and of SWAPO in South-West Africa, now Namibia); the growing organization, militancy and radicalism of the black population; increased corporate wariness about an 'unstable' business climate where the huge profits of the past could no longer be guaranteed; and the diminished need for overt or covert Western support (e.g. the Reagan Administration's policy of 'constructive engagement') for a geopolitically pivotal anti-socialist bulwark in the region. These factors, as well as economic sanctions and South Africa's growing isolation in the new post-communist world, led elements of the white ruling class to make a revised prudential choice (long-term vs. short-term rationality) about the best way to preserve their interests. If today apartheid is almost universally condemned, even by its former architects, it is because of these 'material' shifts. The regime was no less abhorrent forty years ago, but this moral judgment, and the appeal from the black population to the West to do something effective about it, fell largely on deaf ears. What changed global receptivity to the moral message were causes primarily non-moral in character; moral motivation could 'kick in,' become a force on a mass scale, when coun-

tervailing economic interests were either significantly diminished, or actually reoriented so as to coincide with justice. Marx and Engels are simply recognizing some of the unpleasant realities to which the professional ethicist, happily immersed in working out the latest refinement of rule-utilitarianism or contractarianism, is blithely indifferent.

To resolve the apparent 'paradox' (Lukes) of Marx and Engels's views on morality, then — apparent hostility to 'morality' together with apparently moral denunciations of capitalism — all we need to do is to recognize that for Marx and Engels being a moralist commits you to the M' set of meta-theories, the idealist theses that morality is independent of a material genesis, and that moral agitation is sufficient to bring about, or (less strongly) is causally predominant in bringing about, major socio-economic change. This is to see morality 'ideologically' — idealistically. But as Engels underlines in *Anti-Dühring*, 'moral indignation, however justifiable, cannot serve economic science as an argument, but only as a symptom' (CW, 25, 138), since, as he points out later, 'the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange' (CW, 25, 254). Moral indignation may be 'justifiable' (and thus arguably cognitivist) but on its own it just doesn't make the wheels turn.

IV

I am by no means claiming that this reinterpretation solves all of the problems of the debate on Marx and morality, since, as I indicated at the beginning, there are other kinds of problematic passages and other kinds of theoretical difficulties. But I think that this has been one major obstacle to an objectivist analysis, which for the most part has been unsuccessfully negotiated by commentators. Moreover, my particular reading of 'ideology,' through making the conceptual connection with 'idealism,' has the virtue of establishing a link between what have standardly been seen as two *separate* pro-objectivist claims, that there is an interpretation of 'ideology' that permits moral objectivism, and that the real target of Marx and Engels's hostility was 'moralism' rather than 'morality.' If these are *joint* implications of the new reading (since 'ideology' for me refers not to moral truth-values but the illusion of causal primacy), the case for both is arguably strengthened.

Marx and Engels believed (P1) that 'morality' standardly misconceives its own autonomy and causal significance, an assessment of continuing validity even today. But for the purposes of meta-ethical clarification, if nothing else, we can point out that this is a contingent rather than a conceptual truth; we can separate what Marx and Engels

have conflated, and detach M from M'. An objectivist revolutionary morality that self-consciously *recognizes* its material roots in the economic 'revolutionary tendencies' of a situation, and that has no propensity to exaggerate its likely causal efficacy, is not logically or conceptually precluded. Such a morality would be doubly 'realist,' in the meta-ethical sense of being objectivist and in the politically informed sense of facing the uglier facts about how the world really works.²³

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23 Cf. Norman Geras on a specifically Marxist 'moral realism': 'Marxism and Moral Advocacy,' in *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagances* (London and New York: Verso 1990) 3-19.