

Milton Fisk, Marxism and Ethics

Andrew Collier

When Marxists have written about ethics - which they have not often done at any length - they have generally approached the topic in one of two ways: either they have sought to explain moral codes as ideologies with definite material foundations and functions in the class struggle; or they have claimed that there is a positive moral viewpoint inherent in Marxism - explicit in Marx's early writings and/or implicit throughout his work. I have discussed and rejected the latter view elsewhere (1), and shall not return to it here. The former exercise is certainly an essential part of the work of the materialist understanding of history; and in itself it is often de-mystifying as well as explanatory; but it yields no positive ideas for a 'Marxist ethics'. Whether this is to be regretted is a question to which I shall return.

Milton Fisk's book Ethics and Society (2) is a systematic attempt to fill this gap: to provide, that is, a Marxist theory of morality, based firmly on materialism and the class struggle, and with positive, prescriptive consequences. Most of its premisses are ones with which every Marxist would agree: the historical specificity and material basis of moralities; the class struggle as the motor of history; the primacy of collective over individual modes of practical reasoning; and 'naturalism' in the sense of 'this-sidedness'; the rejection of any grounding of morality outside of the natural but socially complexified needs of mankind.

I am going to make some fairly far reaching criticisms of Fisk's conclusions, so I would like to say at the outset that I not only agree with these basic principles and value many of Fisk's argument for and from them very highly; I actually know of no better book on the subject in the whole of Marxist literature. It is closely argued, with pertinent examples and without unexplained technical terms; it should be accessible both to thinking Marxists without a philosophical training, and to anyone concerned with moral philosophy, even if unfamiliar with Marxist theory. It addresses itself to the central problems of Western moral philosophy, and does so in a way that no open-minded person working in that tradition can afford to ignore. It should become essential reading for anyone who takes both Marxism and moral philosophy seriously: I hope that a reasonably priced paperback edition will soon be forthcoming, and make this possible (3).

1 Class and ideology

Marxist accounts of moralities have always seen them as aspects of the ideologies of classes in struggle. In relation to the moralities of the oppressing classes, these accounts have an unambiguously de-mystifying role. The medieval ethic of chivalry, the puritan ethic of thrift and industriousness, or the nationalist ethic of self-sacrifice for the fatherland lose all their plausibility and attractiveness if understood to be conditions for the exploitation of peasants and workers by lords and bosses, or the sacrifice of youth on the altar of the arms profiteers.

But what about 'proletarian morality'? On the one

hand we have statements such as that of Marx and Engels that 'Law, morality and religion are to (the proletariat) so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests' (Communist Manifesto) - which seems to suggest that the 'explanatory critique' of the class nature of morality leads to amorality, such that the proletariat could base its actions openly on self-interest, as other classes have done covertly. On the other hand we have references to a specifically proletarian morality, which consists precisely in furthering the political aims of the workers. Thus Lenin insists there is a communist morality, and rejects only morality 'based on extra-human and extra-class concepts'. He goes on to say, 'Our morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the proletariat's class struggle' ('The Tasks of the Youth Leagues', Selected Works, p.613).

But perhaps the contradiction between 'amorality' and 'class morality' is merely verbal: if collective egoism is the foundation of individual altruism, as Plekhanov suggests (4), then individual workers may observe a 'communist morality' in the service of the 'amoral' egoism of their class. This formulation serves to locate the problem, but not to solve it, for we all know the fallacy of Mill's inference: 'Each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.' The fallacy does not disappear if we substitute the aggregate of all proletarians for that of all persons; we still need to know what are the relations between the collective self-interest and the obligation of the individual - not logical entailment, certainly. Is it an instrumental relationship (individual altruism as a means to collective advancement which is in turn a means to individual interest), or an educational one (altruism inculcated in the individual by the collective), or what? Fisk's book is an attempt to provide an answer.

For Fisk, morality can be nothing else but the obligation of an individual to a group of which he or she is a member, and to fellow-members of that group. On the one hand, where there is no conflict between individual interest and obligation to someone outside the individual, any talk of morality is redundant. On the other hand, that obligation cannot be to God, or to some abstract Kantian moral law, for there is no earthly reason why we should take notice of such alien imperatives; and this applies too to those coming from groups of which one is not a member. This (so far, negative) conception of moral obligation, combined with a Marxist account of society according to which classes are the crucial groups into which mankind is divided, is deemed to yield a class-determined set of duties as envisaged by Lenin. Two points need to be added to this, though: firstly, Fisk also refers to groups other than classes, such as genders, ethnic and sexual minorities; secondly, he refers to sum-groups such as a whole society with whose interest ruling classes will generally confuse their own; and though oppressed groups do well to be very suspicious of appeals to the sum-group's interests, they do appear to have some

purchase where alternative obligation is absent. Mankind as a whole has no common interest, and hence generates duties only by virtue of the hope of future world socialism.

My first criticism of this position concerns an idea which I think underlies a lot of Fisk's arguments, though it is not explicitly stated in the text. Indeed, he also says things which are inconsistent with it. This is the idea that classes (and other groups) are more or less spontaneously constituted as agencies. He often attributes to classes actions which an organised class, a 'class for itself', could carry out, but which a mere 'class in itself', a group sharing a position in the social structure, could not do as such. For instance, he regards discipline imposed by a group on its members as a necessary condition of personal interaction acquiring an ethical character (pp.6-7). But discipline can only be imposed by an organised group or hierarchy. A class is not necessarily in a position to impose discipline on its members - such a capacity depends on a degree of organisation which can only be the product of a prolonged struggle. In fact, Marx thought, probably correctly, that some classes, because of the atomised nature of their place in production, could never achieve such organisation; unless the organised proletariat was strong enough to win them over as allies, they could achieve political representation only through the external discipline of a dictator. Such was the relation of the small proprietors of rural France to Napoleon III. Are we to infer that their personal relations had no ethical character?

Certainly, Fisk is not unaware that the 'groups' that form us into the people we are, are not for the most part the sort of group you could join (e.g. a party, a trade union, a women's group), but the sort you find yourself in (e.g. a class, a race, a family, a gender). But he talks about the class determinants of ethics and ideology generally in a way which only makes sense if each class came into the world with its own ideology, strategically related to its interests, except insofar as it was infiltrated by that of another class. Not that he would deny that, as Bukharin put it, 'the psychology of a class is not always identical with the material interests of that class' (*Historical Materialism*, pp.287-288). On the contrary, he insists that we are not obliged to accept the ideas current in our own class - but only because they might be the result of the influence of an alien class.

In deciding ethical principles we do not want to concentrate simply on the image people have of themselves. We know that this is often misleading as to what they really are. This is not because people are inherently prone to error about themselves, but because people live in a world of conflicting groups. The more powerful among the conflicting groups have a decisive influence on communication and education. They are, then, able to build up in people a distorted image of what they are.
(p.21)

If the problem of ideology were really like this, things would be very simple. One could identify the ideas of the ruling class and the means by which they are disseminated, and distinguish those ideas in the oppressed classes from their own; there would be ready made ideas of the oppressed to be defended against such infiltration. There are both empirical and theoretical objections to this position.

In the first place, empirically, there have been many ideologies which have arisen spontaneously among the oppressed and have served, psychologically speaking, to enhance or preserve their self-esteem, to ease the burden of their conditions of life, to give a heart to the heartless world - and, politically speaking, to reconcile them to their oppression. Every ideology which idealises the oppressed in comparison with their oppressors serves this two-edged function. Sometimes, such ideologies have been persecuted by misguided ruling classes; other - wiser and more cynical - ruling classes have been known to value these autonomous

but constraining ideologies of the oppressed. Consider the aristocratic atheist who thinks that religion (of a certain sort) is good for the masses. Socialists can learn a lot from Nietzsche's concept of a slave rebellion in morals, which defeats the ideology of the masters at the level of moral values, and in the process makes a real slave rebellion appear unnecessary, as the slave class is seen as superior in respect of what is considered the highest virtue - moral virtue.

We do not have to go back to second and third century Christianity to find such ideological mechanisms: they are present in the worker who refuses to read about politics and economics, regarding them as the preserves of despised bourgeois intellectuals; the unemployed graduate who considers de-industrialisation as the royal road to a low-technology utopia without the work-ethic; the woman who, to the irritation of her male friends, plays on her status of helpless - but morally superior - femininity; the Rastafarian who lets the National Front off the hook because black people ought not to be working in factories and taking Ephraim's jobs; the third world nationalist who makes a virtue out of consumer austerity. Such ideologies are the principal enemies of socialism, both because they prevail among those groups which, being oppressed, could otherwise be expected to work for socialism as in their objective interests, and because they are actually more inherently regressive than the 'official', ruling class ideologies.

The only place given by Fisk to the possibility of regressive ideas arising among the oppressed as an effect of oppression itself rather than of the propaganda of the oppressor, is in connection with intimidation.

Out of a fear created by constant harassment, the people of a certain group may have appeared to be passive, docile, and contented.... Through struggle it becomes clear to them that the old code of docility was not the product of what they actually were. It was the joint product of their own fear in the face of intimidation and of the intimidator's propaganda about them.
(p.22)

Aside from the empirical inadequacy of this as an account of spontaneous regressive ideology, the phrase 'what they actually were' raises a spectre of idealist ethics which will not easily be laid: the idea of 'becoming what you are', i.e. not what you empirically are but what you 'really' are, i.e. what you are not but the author in question wishes you were. I shall follow this up in the next section.

The theoretical question concerns the ontology of individuals in society. Fisk seems to be treating the group as the fundamental social category. But groups are constituted by the structure of a society, which distributes individuals into groups. One cannot treat the groups (classes, genders, etc.) as if they were autonomous entities, let alone ones within which teleological explanation is licensed. The attribution to groups as sets of social positions ('classes in themselves'), of activities which can only be carried out by groups as organised collectives ('classes for themselves') is one effect of this autonomisation of groups, which has already been noted. There are others, which I shall discuss in the following sections.

2 The Social Person and Naturalism

Fisk is out to prove that, given an adequate account of the social nature of human individuals, a naturalistic approach to ethics can only yield his 'class relativist' conclusions (5). To this end he presents an account of the relation between the natural and the social in the formation of individuals which I think is correct in essentials, and importantly so. He points out that there are two opposite errors on this matter: atomism, which sees the individual as only peripherally affected by his or her membership of society, having an essential nature ('core person') which is autonomous and, as it were, pre-social. This is the classical bourgeois

conception and (if we leave aside a certain 'radical' rhetoric fashionable in the 1960s about 'de-socialisation' and the evils of 'labelling') has had little appeal for the left. (2) The 'aspect' theory, according to which a person is literally nothing but an aspect of the social organism. Fisk points out that this was Mussolini's view. Either view would presumably remove the motivation for socialism: for the atomist, the task is not to transform society but to keep it at arm's length, and for the organicist, discontent with one's place in society would be like the rebellion of a limb against the body.

Fisk's view is that we do have certain invariant natural needs (which he lists - see the next section), but that the form they take is always socially determined. The relation of natural to social, one might say (6), is that of matter to form, or of an abstract specification to its concrete realisation. It is the same, I think, as the relation of consumption to production, as spelt out in Marx's 1857 Introduction.

This view appears at first sight midway between the atomist and holist extremes. But it is important to distinguish it from another intermediate position: that which regards us as split between natural and social selves. This is an instance of the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness': the fact that we are natural beings socially complexified is interpreted as meaning that a part of us remains natural, while a new social part becomes attached. This faulty social psychology generally issues in an ethical dualism of natural and selfish versus acquired and altruistic desires. As against this it is important to recognise - as Fisk does in his discussion of self-interest, that 'selfishness' is just as much a social product as is 'social' behaviour; and conversely that our 'highest' aspirations have their roots in natural needs.

But when Fisk comes to argue that naturalism entails the primacy of group interests over personal interests, he appears to forget this. Arguing against the idea of 'enlightened self-interest', he says:

In reality no person is ever a mere pre-social entity looking for a group that is most likely to advance its pre-social needs. Any person is already a social being. This has the important consequence that the group a person might choose as best for realising his or her pre-social needs could be the one that blocks the social needs that person already has. Thus enlightened self-interest could easily lead to a one-sided development of the human individual, realising pre-social at the expense of already acquired social needs.

(p.24)

On the face of it, quite a different consequence follows

from the first two sentences in this passage: that self-interest is already social, so that one can't divide it into social and pre-social parts to the advantage of either. But in the light of what I have said earlier about the non-identity of formative groups or institutions and collectives based on common interests, there is more to be said. A person's 'already acquired social needs' will have been acquired through institutions such as their family, church, school, the labour market, the media etc. They may well not coincide with that person's interests as a worker, a woman, a homosexual etc. One function of the concept of nature, natural needs etc. has been to distinguish among a person's mutually conflicting socially acquired needs between those that are ineliminable whatever social or personal changes come about (e.g. for food and shelter), and others. This is the only acceptable sense of 'pre-social needs', and in this sense, the prioritisation of pre-social needs should be quite acceptable to a socialist. There is no danger of pre-social needs in any other sense being prioritised, because there are no such needs. Let me illustrate this point using Fisk's own example:

Suppose you are a woman who has just been offered a sizeable increase in salary to assist the male employment officer in your workplace reviewing job applicants. Pay in your current job classification is little above the legal minimum, and you have several dependents. You need the extra money from the new job to move to an adequate apartment in a safe area. This need does not stem from your nature in isolation but from the social conditions of deprivation. It became clear when the job was approved that it was to be a screen. Your being a woman would be used to protect the management if it were charged with sexual discrimination in hiring.

(pp.12-13)

To illustrate the conflict between group interest and 'pre-social needs', Fisk takes up this example and comments:

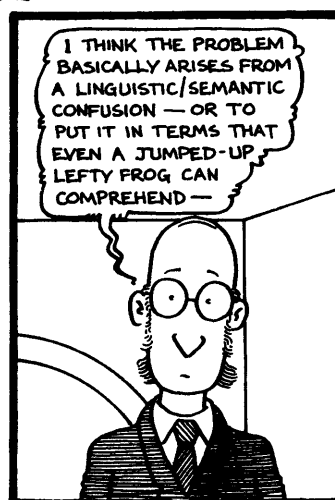
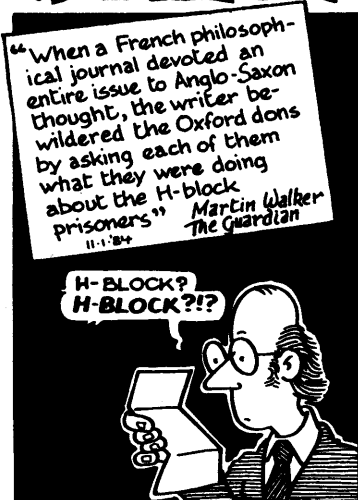
Her unfulfilled need for a better apartment is a consequence of a system of inequality, and is thus socially conditioned. But behind this lies a need for shelter that is not socially conditioned. Once we artificially abstract this pre-social need from the context of social inequality, she can be considered as someone who might take care of the pre-social need for shelter by accepting the system of discrimination imposed by management.

(p.24)

The woman has two conflicting wants, both socially conditioned: for 'an adequate apartment in a safe area', and for non-discriminatory hiring. The adherent of enlightened

A PIECE OF THE ACTION

BY #40 1/84
CORMAC



self-interest has no reason for looking behind them for pre-social needs, any more than Fisk has. One would have to introduce, from outside her wants as described, some principle about the relative weight that should be given to needs stemming from group loyalties and other needs, or to those stemming from loyalty to the group of women and those stemming from loyalty to the group comprised of her and her dependents, before one could resolve this dilemma; or alternatively one would be thrown back on the subjective strength of the conflicting wants. If 'naturalism' rules out anything, it is just such an appeal to an external principle not grounded in the agent's existing (socially conditioned) wants. And this exclusion cuts two ways: certainly it rules out a kind of dogmatic egoism:

... by avoiding group entanglements the person forfeits the realization of those among his or her possibilities that depend on cooperation and mutual understanding. The selfish person is not, then, acting naturally but rather acting in a way that puts obstacles before the most natural ways of acting for a social person.

(p.23)

But it also cuts against altruism, if that means always putting group interest first.

Certainly, there are circumstances in which the 'pre-social' aspect of some needs comes to the fore: suppose the woman faced eviction for non-payment of rent, so that unless she could raise the money she would be sleeping outside in sub-zero temperatures. In that case, the 'abstraction' is not artificial, but brought about by the circumstances themselves. And in that case, the argument for her taking the job is much stronger.

Fisk has to show that group needs alone are natural: the most he can claim to have shown is that they are also natural. The case for treating non-group interests as alien is based on the claims (i) that apparently 'private' interests are actually those of alien groups, and (ii) that the 'core person' is formed by group membership. Both views seem to me to be plausible only if one holds a version of the 'aspect theory' of the person (7). It is just not the case that the need for shelter has its source in alien groups, as Fisk himself admits when he refers to its pre-social aspect. Such groups may make use of whatever weakens someone's group loyalties; but not everyone who chickens out of a fight is an agent of the enemy.

The whole concept of the 'core person' requires further consideration. Fisk has quite rightly argued against the atomist view that the core person is asocial: there is no part of us that is not a social product. But that does not require us to say that the core person is social: it would be better to say that there is no core person.

The concept of the 'core person' - or its time-honoured equivalents, like 'real self', 'true nature', 'essential being' - always serves a moral function, which it logically pre-supposes, and of which it can't be the ground. It serves to divide the actually existing desires of an individual into two groups, one of which is then privileged at the expense of the other. There are many possible ways to divide up an 'individual', and every 'core person' theory selects one on the basis of moral judgments it has already decided upon. There may be good reasons for preferring Fisk's ethic of solidarity among the oppressed to e.g. the Aristotelian cultivation of species-specific traits, but neither follows from the (shared) conception of the social person (political animal).

A propos of the woman in his example, Fisk talks about remaining 'true to one's nature as formed by the group of women'; but it is most certainly not - and could not be - the collectivity of women who determine what it is to be a woman. It is (a) the givens of biology, (b) the institutions of socialisation, particularly the family, and (c) the code which determines what possibilities are open and what closed to a woman in a given society. We make each other, said Marx and Engels, but we don't make ourselves. To be true to one's 'nature', one's 'identity', as a woman, a

worker or whatever is to be true to what existing society has made of one. The tendency to slide from talking about group interests to talking about group identity should be resisted: it can only lead to putting flowers on one's chains.

This problem crops up again in Fisk's attempt to distinguish the authentic from the 'imposed' needs of oppressed groups. But first I shall make some general remarks about the theory of human needs.

3 Needs

The discussion about class struggle and ideology, individuals and groups, draws on a scientific theory - albeit a contested one - the materialist conception of history. This is not true of the section on human needs, a topic on which there is notoriously no theory, or no one theory, within Marxism (8).

In the absence of such a theory, Fisk presents his own. But for all its commonsensical plausibility, it remains an exercise in speculative anthropology. He declares that there are four invariant 'survival needs', namely for food, sex, support and deliberation. But this list strikes me as arbitrary. Only food and support are strictly necessary for individual survival, and moreover support and deliberation could well be regarded as derivative of the physiologically grounded needs for food and sex, universal only because they are necessary in order to satisfy these needs in any society. But then there are many other such empirically invariant and necessary derivative needs, such as curiosity and the need for power. Once universal needs without direct physiological determinants are allowed into the list, there is literally no knowing when to stop.

It might be asked, what is the alternative to anthropological speculation on commonsensical foundations in this matter? I think two possibilities present themselves. One could draw on some scientific theory such as psychoanalysis. This would be my preferred solution, but of course psychoanalysis, like any social science, including the materialist conception of history, is contested, and perhaps Fisk rejects it. Anyway it would be out of place to argue for it in the context of a book on ethics; and even if it were to be accepted on trust, the question would remain: which psychoanalytical theory of needs? That of the early Freud and Reich? That of the later Freud and Klein? The former for men and the latter for women? Perhaps after all it would be better, at the present stage of knowledge, to opt for the other alternative.

The alternative solution is to abstain from speculating about invariant needs altogether, and to talk only about the specific needs of specific classes in specific societies. Such forbearance would not be to assume that there are no invariant needs, but only to recognise that, as everyone is in fact a member of a given class in a given society, we don't need to postulate invariant needs before knowing what it is rational to do.

It is instructive in this connection to look at the way Marx and Engels reply to certain objections to communism:

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine tenths.

And again:

It has been objected that upon the abolition of private property all work will cease, and universal laziness with overtake us.

According to this, bourgeois society ought long ago to have gone to the dogs through sheer idleness; for those of its members who work, acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything, do not work.

('The Communist Manifesto', in The Revolution of 1848, p.82)

One may surmise from this how Marx and Engels might have answered the objections to socialism as 'contrary to human nature', presented today by many social ethologists. They need neither have presented their own speculations about human nature, nor indulged in historicist sophisms to the effect that 'there is no such thing as human nature', which won't stand up to two minutes' examination (9). They might have said: So human beings have an inherent need for private territory? But capitalism deprives the working class of the means to satisfy this need. It is not us socialists who need to worry about your discoveries, it is the defenders of the present order. We aim to abolish class property in production (and you will surely not ask us to believe that our long-tailed ancestors bequeathed us a need to own shares in limited companies?) precisely to secure for each worker his or her own territory.

This sort of defence of the possibility of socialism in terms of existing institutions, and its desirability in terms of existing needs of oppressed people, is characteristic of classical Marxist arguments for socialism. We don't need to ask whether a need is integral to a class or 'imposed'. After all, the whole nature of the proletarians as proletarians is 'imposed'. Insofar as their needs are social and class needs, they are the product of capitalist society. There are no 'autonomous' needs, proletarian but not imposed. The materialist concept of 'the social individual' precludes from the outset any authentic-needs/imposed-needs distinction; and socialist politics has no use for it. The case for socialism rests on the restrictions placed by capitalism on the satisfaction of the needs of its exploited: socialism must take sides with those needs, warts and all. The 'consumer society' aspect of capitalism is its progressive side, as Marx noted:

In spite of all the pious talk about frugality (the capitalist) searches for all possible ways of stimulating (the workers) to consume, by making his commodities more attractive, by filling their ears with babble about new needs. It is precisely this aspect of the relationship between capital and labour which is an essential civilizing force, and on which the historic justification - but also the contemporary power - of capital is based.

If we forget this, and start trying to tell people what they ought to want, we are back with moralistic utopias, and the political effects can only be Blanquism in opposition and Stalinism in power.

This is not to deny that a coherent sense can be given to the notion of a false need. But it is to deny its political import, and to warn of the totalitarian and anti-working class potential of its incorporation in political discourse. It is surely a sign of the political maturity of Western workers, not their 'backwardness', that they slam the door on the sort of socialist who tells them that they don't really need annual holidays or televisions or whatever.

4 Summary and an observation

The above three sections of this essay have been concerned with three parallel errors on the part of Milton Fisk, concerning the nature of classes in society, of the social individual, and of human needs respectively. I claim that:

(i) the classes and other groups whose interrelations constitute the social structure, and membership of which determines our social being, are not in the first place and for the most part organised groups with consciously worked out ideologies geared to their collective interests. The common interests of their members are therefore not necessarily embodied in any practice of discipline or solidarity, or code of values and duties effective among their members.

(ii) it is not possible to map the determinance of class relations within the social structure, onto a supposed dominance of class-determined characteristics within the individual. Only in special political conjunctures, which result from long struggles, do class interests come to prevail in

the motivation of class members, and it does not help to present this process of ideological transformation as one of discovery of a true nature that was there all along.

(iii) a division of human needs into 'true' and 'false' ones along political lines is unjustified, unhelpful and dangerous.

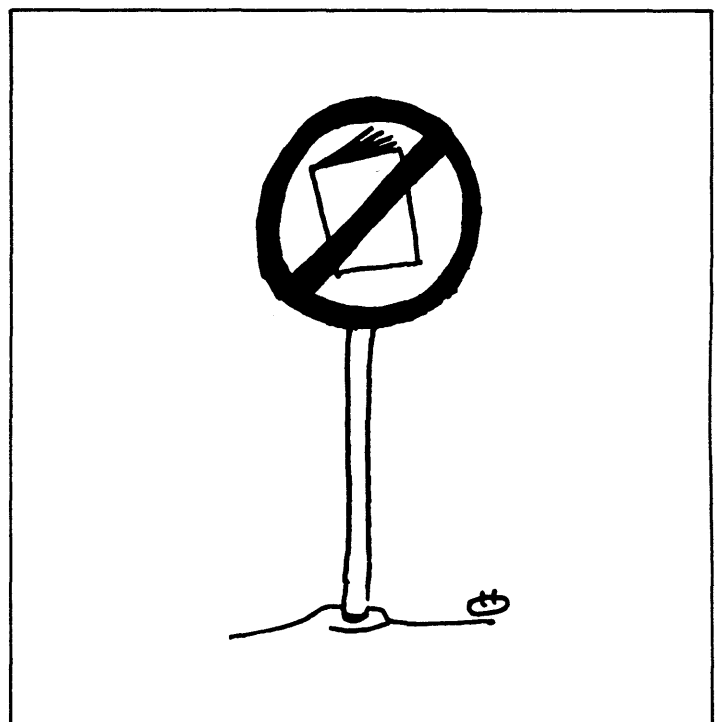
These considerations severely limit the scope of the only type of obligation that Fisk recognises: the obligations that come with membership of a group. In view of this, I think it may be worth venting a sense of unease that I have about Fisk's ethics, though a sense of unease is of course not an argument.

Throughout the history of ethical and political reflection, one enduring contrast has been between universalism and exclusiveness. Most people to the left of centre would regard it as an important breakthrough when the national exclusiveness of the ancient Hebrews, Greeks or Romans came to be criticised by people like Amos, the Cynics or the early Christians. But this universalism was not founded on any social group with real common interests: are we wrong to admire it? Or to bring the issue up to date, let me ask about three instances, the first perhaps rather flip-pant, the second very serious, though, for the time being, of no immediate practical relevance, the third from current politics, though perhaps less problematic than the others from Fisk's standpoint.

(i) Should we condemn Marx and Engels as traitors to their class (the bourgeoisie)? If not, why not? (10)

(ii) The use of Red Terror in post-revolutionary Russia can be defended in terms of the exigencies of civil war; the use of mass terror against workers, peasants and the Communist Party itself by Stalin can be condemned from the standpoint of working class politics and ethics; but between these two judgments, it seems to me that there is a large area of the practice of the Bolsheviks which is very questionable - indeed, which must be called crime rather than error - yet which can't be condemned from the standpoint of a purely class morality, as the victims were class enemies, or at least outside the alliance of classes on which workers' power was based. Violence is sometimes necessary, but there should be a very strong presumption against its use - much stronger than can be based on the idea that, other things being equal (i.e. class things), we should treat people well by virtue of the possible future unity of mankind under socialism.

(iii) The commitment of sections of the left in the UK to 'buying British', and to import controls seems to be to



be contrary to the spirit of socialist internationalism; I doubt if this view can be justified purely in terms of the really shared interests of the working class worldwide. A sharper form of the same problem arises in connection with the collective interests of white workers in South Africa, for instance.

It seems to me that some form of human fellow feeling independent of group interests plays a part in the motivation of values - a view which need not involve any naive optimism about human nature: Hume, for instance, requires only the irreducibility of 'sympathy', making no assumptions about its relative strength when pitted against self-love. All of which may sound rather unmarxist, though Marx with his maxim 'nihil humani a me alienum puto' might not have been averse to it.

5 Alternative approaches

The conclusion must be that, though Fiskian obligation holds an important place in practical reasoning, it can by no means account for the whole of it. If Fisk wants to say that other areas of practical reason are not moral ones, I would not argue; but they are none the less important for that. Does this mean that Marxism has nothing to say about practical reasoning outside the context of solidarity within a collective? What then has come of the claim that collective practical reasoning has priority over individual?

What remains of the latter, I think, is that, because structures (not collectives) have explanatory primacy over individual 'wills', the alteration of structures - which requires collective action - is always a more radical and effective solution to a problem than the alteration of individual 'wills'. In Plekhanov's words:

Virtue requires, not to be preached, but to be prepared by the reasonable arrangement of social relations. By the light-hearted verdict of the conservatives and reactionaries of the last century, the morality of the French materialists up to the present day considered to be an ego-tistical morality. They themselves gave a much truer definition: in their view it passed entirely into politics.

(Selected Philosophical Works, Vol. I, p.493)

The idea that politics and morality are alternative ways in which mankind (or parts of it) confronts its problems, such that over-rating morality diverts from political action to individual adjustment, must be the first word of any Marxist account of morality.

But it can't be the last word. This is not, as is often said, because political action itself requires moral motivation: such motivation is neither always present, nor always admirable when it is. The point is rather that in the lag between the desire for revolution and its accomplishment, there are better and worse ways of living, and it is possible to think and argue rationally about them, even though their relation to the political struggle may be minimal. To postdate all personal cheques to the revolution is mere eschatological evasiveness, 'pie in the sky'; and to deny the distinction and tension between 'the personal' and 'the political' is to turn a blind eye to the following facts: (i) that political change can't be brought about simply by changing individuals; (ii) that political change will not in itself resolve all personal problems; (iii) that the set of changes in individuals that are politically significant is determinable only by looking at political requirements, not at personal ones; they are just those changes which will lead to effective political activity; (iv) that such changes may not be the most personally significant, and conversely, the most personally significant changes may have little or no political import; (v) that there is no guarantee of harmony between personal and political liberation; qualities requisite in a political militant may be undesirable ones if considered aside from politics; (vi) there is no generally applicable reason for supposing that the qualities requisite either for socialist political effectiveness or for personal fulfilment

under capitalist conditions, will resemble the characteristics of people in a future socialist commonwealth. For instance, physical courage may be a virtue in a revolutionary, but an aberration in a citizen of a peaceful socialist world. In general, a certain 'hardness' is necessary both for personal survival and for political effectiveness under capitalism, while we may expect people raised under communism to be 'soft' to the point of what might now be considered as decadence, and be none the worse for it.

Does all this mean that Marxism has nothing to say about personal ethics, except that it should play second fiddle to politics?

In fact, I believe, it has two kinds of thing to say, one vague and positive, the other specific and negative. The specific and negative sort derives from the contribution made by the materialist conception of history to the explanation of moral codes. There are some ideas which cannot in logic be held conjointly with the true explanatory account of those ideas. To explain such ideas is by the same token to criticise them. Marxist accounts of moral ideologies constitute just such 'explanatory critiques' (11). Convinced of the truth of such a critique of one's own moral ideology, one would have to revise it in determinate ways. There can be no generally applicable theory of the content of the resultant moral ideology, except in the vaguest possible terms: it will be a 'this-sided' one, and hence ultimately hedonistic in aim and rational in method. This conjunction by no means generates utilitarianism, which is only one specification of this much broader naturalistic type of ethic. It is necessary to say this, because there is a tendency among Marxists to see any defence of rationality and hedonism as leading at best to a Benthamite calculus, at worst to cynical egoism. No doubt this is why E.P. Thompson felt justified, on the basis of my essay 'On the Production of Moral Ideology', and in complete ignorance of my age, class and personal habits, in calling me a 'revolting young bourgeois' (12). Engels warned his contemporaries not to view the sex life of primitive peoples 'through brothel-spectacles'; it is equally necessary to warn against seeing rationalism and hedonism in ethics through stock exchange spectacles.

Negatively speaking, then, it is possible to say that explanatory critiques will tend to eliminate irrational, other-worldly and anti-hedonistic aspects of the moral ideologies to which they are applied. But the end product will remain a historically and biographically determinate complexification of hedonism, not an abstract utilitarianism (13).

The application of explanatory critiques to one's own moral ideology is, I believe, the only rational content that can be given to the practice of 'ethics', if one is to remain within materialism. It is therefore the only 'ethics' which is compatible with Marxism; but not a 'Marxist ethics' as such, for Marxian theory is not the only source of the relevant explanatory critiques.

The vague and positive implication of Marxism for ethics is precisely naturalism, in the sense of justifying values only in terms of human interests. It is vague because the term 'human interests' is vague, but while we remain at that level of generality, it must remain vague, for to achieve specificity, the historical and biographical conjuncture must be specified, and an explanatory critique applied to the ethic characteristic of that conjuncture. The resultant set of values in each case will be as unique as the conjuncture to which the critique was applied (14).

Footnotes

- 1 In my paper 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol.IV, and the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy's* supplement on *Marx and Moral Philosophy*.
- 2 *Ethics and Society: A Marxist Interpretation of Value*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1980.
- 3 There are two terminological points that I would like to mention. One of the errors which Fisk, in accordance with a common but unfortunate Marxist practice, attributes to bourgeois ideology, is 'individualism'. The impression is given that this term refers to one identifiable ideology. In fact, it has many senses, some of them mutually incompatible, and some acceptable to a Marxist, some not. The ambiguity of

this word is itself a valuable weapon in the armoury of bourgeois ideology, and no Marxist should use the word without specifying the exact sense, which I am afraid Fisk does not do. Thus on the first page of the preface (p.xiii) he says: 'Individualism is not just a view that backs up the behaviour of the loner. It also holds that the nature of the human agent can be understood independently of the groups he or she happens to live in.' But the sort of individualism referred to in the latter sentence does not even back up the loner - rather it holds him or her down to be kicked by the agents of 'society' (i.e. of the ruling class).

The second misleading term is 'relativism'. Admittedly, this term is given a clear technical sense in the text. But it is an unusual one. Views like Fisk's (and mine) which uphold objectivity in practical reason, but recognise that there are objectively good reasons for people in different social situations (e.g. different classes) doing different things, would not generally be regarded as relativist. On the other hand it is arguable that most of the orthodoxies in English-speaking moral philosophy are relativist in a stronger sense (e.g. emotivism, prescriptivism, moral traditions theory).

- 4 Selected Philosophical Works, Vol. IV, p.241. Plekhanov opts for the 'educational' relation between collective egoism and individual altruism, which is no doubt also Mill's conception. The problems of this view are about the fate of this altruism when subjected to an 'explanatory critique' (see below).
- 5 Where naturalism is defined by two postulates:
 'I. Ethical life and all that on which it depends is totally encompassed within the universe of people, their groups, and the material things they use.'
 'II. Human nature is the ultimate basis for the origin, the authority, and the validity of ethical principles' (p.21); and the four possible types of ethic are those based on selfishness, enlightened self-interest, group interest (Fisk's view), and selflessness.
- 6 To put it another way:
 '... no single environment can show the nature of anything, because to know the nature of anything (a woman, a lump of iron, x-rays, mosquitoes or black holes) is to know its potential; that if it is in one environment it will appear or behave in one way; that if it is in another, it may be different.' Janet Radcliffe Richards, in The Sceptical Feminist, p.37. This whole discussion of 'The Proper Place of Nature' in Chapter Two of that much maligned book is excellent, showing up most Marxist accounts of the same subject as neglectfully amateur.
- 7 The version of the 'aspect theory' which I believe Fisk slides into at times treats individuals as aspects not of society as a whole, but of the groups of which they are members. While less oppressively monolithic than more holistic theories, this is in some ways further from the truth, in that it ignores ways other than group membership in which individuals are produced by the social structure, and appears to make the group rather than the social structure the primary entity. It thus res-

embles the model of non-atomistic social science commonly presented by its atomist opponents, as a theory of groups rather than a theory of relations (see Roy Bhaskar's discussion of this matter in The Possibility of Naturalism, pp.31-47).

- 8 See Kate Soper's book On Human Needs, Harvester Press, 1981.
- 9 Anyone who seriously believed that there is no human nature should have no objection to admitting a squirrel, a turnip or a pair of binoculars to Party membership. The popularity of that slogan comes from the need to refute those who say 'you can't change human nature', meaning by 'human nature' the way people we know tend to behave. Strictly speaking, it is a trivial tautology that human nature can't be changed, because human nature is by definition that in people which can't be changed and which explains why they act one way in one environment and a different way in another (see note 5). You can make steam or ice out of water, but that is not to change the nature of H₂O, because it is no part of the nature of H₂O to be a liquid, but only to be liquid between zero and 100 degrees centigrade. What we need to ask is what the content of human nature is, and, hence, how people's behaviour will change with specific changes of circumstances.
 Milton Fisk avoids the obvious errors in this area, but his conception of human nature as the four 'survival needs' (quite apart from the objections I have made against it) limits what can be said about this overmuch. A great many concrete results can be obtained about how people will behave under these or those conditions.
- 10 Speaking for myself as a WASP male petty bourgeois, I could certainly not account for my own political commitments in terms of groups of which I am an involuntary member, and I would not ascribe them to 'altruism' either.
- 11 The term 'explanatory critique' is Roy Bhaskar's - see his article 'Scientific Explanation and Human Emancipation' in Radical Philosophy No.26. My own article 'On the Production of Moral Ideology' in Radical Philosophy No.9 was an attempt at an explanatory critique in the context of ethics (though marked by a certain naive optimism). See also Roy Edgley's writings about dialectic.
- 12 The Poverty of Theory, p.179.
- 13 This is in line with Marx's comment about Bentham's utilitarianism: 'To know what is useful for a dog, one must investigate the nature of dogs. This nature is not itself deducible from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch' (Capital, Vol. I, pp.758-59, note 51, Pelican edition).
- 14 As my conclusion is, in form, pure Spinozism, I had better mention the difference in content: Spinoza's conatus is not identical with Freud's 'pleasure-principle', and in speaking of hedonism I am referring to the latter.

