

Saggi

Friedrich Engels's Contribution to Marxist Moral Theory

Il contributo di Friedrich Engels alla teoria morale marxista

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Abstract. Scholars have largely ignored Engels's views on morality, even though there is an extensive literature on Marx's statements, or implicit positions, on moral matters. Yet Engels's comments on moral questions also deserve our attention, for his writings help to elucidate the class character and ideological nature of moral views; explain why Marxists hold that the moral outlook of the proletariat represents the most advanced morality; and provide grounds for rejecting the overly reductionistic explanations of moral phenomena often associated with Marxism. Taken together, Engels's ideas lay the groundwork for a distinctively communist outlook on morality and moral questions.

Keywords: Friedrich Engels, morality, *Anti-Dühring*, Marxism, communism.

Riassunto. Gli studiosi hanno in gran parte ignorato le opinioni di Engels sulla moralità, anche se esiste un'ampia letteratura sulle affermazioni di Marx, o sulle sue posizioni implicite, in merito alle questioni morali. Eppure anche i commenti di Engels sulle questioni morali meritano la nostra attenzione, poiché i suoi scritti aiutano a chiarire il carattere di classe e la natura ideologica delle visioni morali; spiegano perché i marxisti ritengono che la visione morale del proletariato rappresenti la moralità più avanzata; e forniscono le basi per rifiutare le spiegazioni eccessivamente riduzionistiche dei fenomeni morali spesso associate al marxismo. Nel loro insieme, le idee di Engels gettano le basi per una visione tipicamente comunista della moralità e delle questioni morali.

Parole chiave: Friedrich Engels, moralità, *Anti-Dühring*, marxismo, comunismo.

Introduction

More than four decades ago, the late Kai Nielsen observed, “Friedrich Engels wrote more fully and perhaps more adequately about morality than did Karl Marx.”¹ A close reading of Engels’s works bears out these observations and even enables us to dispense with Nielsen’s qualification: Engels wrote both more fully (i.e., at greater length) *and* more adequately about morality than did Marx. Even so, scholars have devoted little attention to Engels’s views on morality, at least in comparison with the extensive philosophical literature on Marx’s comments, or implicit positions, on moral matters (the bulk of which literature – countless articles and quite a few books – appeared in the 1970s and 1980s).² In fact, in English-language commentaries that focus on Engels’s works alone, there is, as far as I can tell, practically no discussion of Engels’s views on the nature of morality – nothing in the pages of *Friedrich Engels for the 21st Century*,³ or in *The Life, Work and Legacy of Friedrich Engels: Emerging from Marx’s Shadow*,⁴ or in *Friedrich Engels: A Centenary Appreciation*,⁵ or in *Engels after Marx*,⁶ or in the special issue of *International Socialism* published as *The Revolutionary Ideas of Friedrich Engels*,⁷ or in *Science and Society*’s centenary issue on Engels.⁸ Indeed, the essay from Kai Nielsen from which I have cited, originally published in 1983 in, of all places, *Studies in Soviet Thought*, seems to be one of the very few essays that examines Engels’s views on morality, and Nielsen limits his work to a consideration of *Anti-Dühring*.

In what follows, I would like to consider a few of Engels’s most distinctive contributions to a Marxist – and communist – approach to morality. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using “morality” in the broad, uncontentious sense of

an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and includes what are commonly known as the moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal.⁹

¹ Nielsen, “Engels on Morality and Moral Theorizing,” 43.

² For an excellent review and analysis of one question prominent in these debates – namely, whether Marx condemns capitalism as unjust – see Geras, “The Controversy About Marx and Justice” and “Bringing Marx to Justice: An Addendum and Rejoinder.”

³ Carver and Rasic, *Friedrich Engels*.

⁴ Illner, Frambach and Koubek, *Life, Work and Legacy*.

⁵ Arthur, *Friedrich Engels*.

⁶ Steger and Carver, *Engels after Marx*.

⁷ Rees, *Revolutionary Ideas*.

⁸ Kircz and Löwy, “Friedrich Engels.”

⁹ Gert, *Morality*, 13.

As Engels addresses moral questions in works spanning the course of his life as a political thinker, I will be referring to a variety of texts, from his early “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” written in 1843, to the very late work “A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Programme of 1891,” written by Engels only four years before his death. Careful consideration of the texts in which Engels addresses moral questions reveals, or so I will argue, that his works contain many fruitful theses in connection with moral questions. These include his elucidation of the class character of moral views; his defense of the claim that the moral outlook of the proletariat represents the most advanced morality; and his resistance to, and criticism of, excessively reductionistic explanations of moral phenomena.

Engels's Appeals to Morality

Before discussing these three ideas, it is worth noting one striking contrast, or pair of contrasts, between Engels and Marx with regard to the use of explicit moral categories in criticizing capitalism and defending an alternative, post-capitalist social arrangement (i.e., socialism/communism).¹⁰ In the case of the young Engels, this contrast with Marx involves, in one important essay in particular, an explicit and multifaceted moral argument *against* capitalism; in the case of the mature Engels, we find a contrast with Marx in the form of explicit moral appeals *for* an alternative to capitalism. So it is that in “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,”¹¹ the pioneering essay from the young Engels (1843) to which I just alluded, Engels denounces “the immorality of the economist” and the “hypocritical way of misusing morality for immoral purposes [which] is the pride of the free-trade system”; decries “the immorality of lending at interest”; and, in general, rails against “the despicable immorality of this system” (capitalism) and, indeed, “the immorality of mankind’s condition hitherto,” because of competition and the existence and operation of anti-theoretical interests.¹² As for the later Engels’s comments bearing on the post-capitalist future, the following line from *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), a demand couched in unambiguously moral terms, is particularly noteworthy: “But this is not as it ought to be. What

¹⁰ I prefer the broad term “post-capitalist social arrangement” here because Engels often neglects to use (as we see below) the words “socialist”/“socialism,” or “communist”/“communism,” in discussing the alternative that he envisions and defends.

¹¹ It is perhaps worth recalling here that until the 1870s, “political economy” was a term used “to describe the subject of economic theory” (Kurt W. Rothschild, as quoted in Arestis and Sawyer, “Introduction,” XII).

¹² Engels, “Outlines of a Critique,” 437; 423; 430; 443; 432.

is good for the ruling class should be good for the whole of the society with which the ruling class identifies itself.”¹³ Likewise noteworthy, and in a somewhat similar vein, is Engels’ insistence, in his 1891 “Introduction to K. Marx’s *Wage Labour and Capital*,” that “a new social order is possible in which the present class differences will have disappeared,” although this may “perhaps [be] after a short transitional period involving some privation,...[which is] at any rate of great value morally.”¹⁴ This passage is striking not only because it mentions the “moral value” of privation on the road to socialism, but also because of its relevance to contemporary debates regarding the costs and sacrifices that we may have to endure in a transition to an environmentally sustainable society, as societies adopt principles and practices which entail a lower standard of living (at least in terms of the values that define contemporary consumerist capitalism).

Engels’s Contributions to the Marxist Interpretation of Morality

Let me now return to the three theses that I mentioned above. The first of these theses has to do with Engels’s elucidation of the class character of moral views. Engels’s basic claim in this regard is twofold. First, Engels contends that, as he puts it in *Anti-Dühring*, “morality has always been class morality.”¹⁵ One natural way to interpret this proposition is to assume that Engels is claiming that morality is *class-specific*, in the sense that every social class exhibits a distinctive moral outlook and that a person’s class membership decisively shapes and determines her moral beliefs, values and principles. As he writes in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, “In reality every class, even every profession, has its own morality.”¹⁶ This view follows, of course, from a fundamental premise of historical materialism, which Engels also states in *Anti-Dühring*, namely, that human beings,

consciously or unconsciously, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based – from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange.¹⁷

Accordingly, fundamental changes in the latter will normally lead to significant modifications in people’s “ethical ideas.” Although I cannot pur-

¹³ Engels, *Origin of the Family*, 276.

¹⁴ Engels, “Introduction,” 201.

¹⁵ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 87.

¹⁶ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 381.

¹⁷ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 87.

sue this question in detail here, I would at least like to note one significant implication, or corollary, of this thesis, which is the following: in a communist society, we can reasonably expect there to be less moral pluralism, the major source of variations in moral views – social classes – having disappeared. This implication of Engels's (and Marx's) view on this question is important, as it represents a basic disagreement with standard liberal political theory, which assumes that a high degree of moral pluralism is an ineluctable feature of all modern, complex societies and that only repressive policy measures can substantially reduce this pluralism. If, however, Engels is correct in assuming that much of the content of an individual's moral orientation derives from his or her class membership (because of the experiences and interests bound up with one's specific class location) and class differentiation will not exist in a communist society, we can reasonably expect to find far more moral agreement under communism. Classlessness will not only foster moral agreement, incidentally, but also significantly affect the purview of morality, insofar as it will eliminate the need to apply moral principles and deliberation to the cluster of conflicts, antagonisms, and social tensions that arise from class divisions, which will have ceased to exist.

The second component of Engels's thesis regarding the class character of moral views – and one which may, at first glance, seem to contradict the thesis that I have just summarized – consists in Engels's assumption that there will be many moral values, principles, precepts, etc. common to all members of society, irrespective of a person's class status, even within class-based societies. In other words, some moral beliefs will command a supra-class allegiance; members of different social classes will subscribe to many of the same values and principles.¹⁸ Engels seems to hold, then, both that morality is specific to a social class and that it – or at least some elements of it – are not. Does Engels contradict himself?

Engels explains the reasoning behind the second idea as follows: “the Christian-feudal morality,” in its various manifestations, “the modern-bourgeois morality,” and “the proletarian morality of the future” – the three moral systems operative, to one degree or another, in the capitalist societies of his time – “represent three different stages of the same historical development, have...a common historical background” and so “necessarily have *much* in common.”¹⁹ So, what we find in these societies is a blending of successive stages in the evolution of moral consciousness. This argument, which we might call, borrowing Trotsky's terminology, the “combined and uneven development” view of moral evolution, is, I believe,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 86-87; emphasis added.

the only reasoning that Engels offers to support his thesis that some moral beliefs are common to members of all classes in capitalist societies. But it would not be difficult to provide additional arguments for Engels's claim, both from a Marxist perspective and in terms of more general philosophico-ethical considerations, arguments that are perhaps even more helpful in removing the apparent contradiction between Engels's two claims.

As the *Communist Manifesto*, a work written jointly by Engels and Marx, tells us, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class."²⁰ As moral beliefs plainly comprise "ideas" in the relevant sense, it follows that at least some of the ruling class's moral beliefs will be hegemonic in a class-divided society and thus, to this extent at least, *everyone's* beliefs, whatever class one happens to belong to. Furthermore, if we bear in mind that Engels and Marx hold that a given class's rule is marked by an ascendent and descending phase – its rule in the first phase representing the interests of society generally, as this dominance serves to develop the forces of production and promote social progress, while in the second phase this rule represents a merely particular interest and involves, increasingly, an obstacle to socio-economic development – it is reasonable to suppose that all of society will embrace the ruling class's morality so long as it constitutes a "rising" class. Another way of effectively stating the same thing is to say that all members of a given socio-economic system will embrace those moral ideas that are essential to the structural viability and durability of this system.²¹ (This is essentially the same point because the moral ideas in question will be, from a Marxist perspective, precisely those ideas that serve to develop the forces of production and promote social progress.) On the other hand, to the extent that the ruling class becomes a class in decline and ceases to represent the interests of society as a whole and, at the same time, "the oppressed class became [i.e., has become] powerful enough" (to use Engels's words), there will also exist a morality, alongside that of the bourgeoisie and the remnants of earlier moralities that continue to shape many individuals' moral views, which reflects the oppressed class's "indignation against" the ruling class's "domination" and expresses "the future interests of the oppressed."²²

²⁰ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 503. For a nearly identical formulation of this idea, see Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 59.

²¹ Cf. Nielsen, "Engels on Morality", 53: "But even the contending antagonistic classes of a class society will have, even with their clashing moralities, moralities with some common content with that of the morality of the dominant class. This common content will result from their common historical background and from the need of those moralities, in one way or another, to support to some degree at least the economic relations of that society."

²² Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 87.

Quite apart from these arguments suggested by classical Marxist assumptions, there is the simple fact that, as Nielsen has argued in some of his writings on Marxism and morality, a variety of moral truisms will likely inform the moral practices of all societies; these truisms – e.g., that suffering is bad, health, pleasure and autonomy good, etc.²³ – are, *as truisms*, going to be valid for all members of a given society. The existence of moral truisms thus furnishes additional grounds, along with Engels's own explanation cited above and the Marxist reasoning sketched in the previous paragraph, for assuming that certain moral principles and beliefs will be common to everyone in society, even if one also holds that there are moral outlooks or perspectives specific to each class. In light of these considerations, it seems safe to conclude that there is no contradiction between Engels's claim that "every class...has its own morality" and his contention that social classes' distinctive moral outlooks "necessarily have much in common."

The second aspect of Engels's views on morality that I would like to discuss is his defense of the claim that the moral outlook of the proletariat represents the most advanced morality. In a well-known passage from *Anti-Dühring*, Engels remarks that the "proletarian morality [...] contains the maximum elements promising permanence" and that it "represents the overthrow of the present, [and] represents the future." It is in this sense, then, that one may say that the proletariat's morality is, among those moralities which coexist in modern capitalist societies, the closest to being "the true one,"²⁴ and the one which corresponds to a superior phase of moral (and socio-economic) development. The fact that the oppressed make up the immense majority of the population, as Engels assumes,²⁵ merely strengthens the claim that their moral outlook represents the "morality of the future" (as Engels puts it in a passage cited above), at least if we assume that this morality reflects the interests of the oppressed (the proletariat) and we grant the premise that society should, other things being equal, prioritize – by, for example, adopting certain moral principles – the interests of the majority.

It is worth stressing in this connection that elsewhere Engels articulates a bit more explicitly the presupposition contained in the passages just cited, namely, that successive moral outlooks represent and embody *improvements* in morals. "All successive historical states," writes Engels, "are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human

²³ Nielsen, "Introduction," 13, 10; "Marxism, Morality," 32-33.

²⁴ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 87; cf. 104.

²⁵ Recall, for example, the well-known line from the *Communist Manifesto*, 495: "The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."

society from the lower to the higher.”²⁶ In this passage, “to the higher” (“*zum Höhern*”) plainly implies “better”; later historical stages and states are, therefore, superior to the earlier ones. To be sure, “stages” and “states” naturally refer to some general configuration of society, and therefore Engels’s statement cannot be construed as meaning that later stages and states are superior to earlier ones in *every* respect, or with regard to *every* new development (which would include, for example, greater levels of pollution and traffic; the degradation of certain occupations; and unprecedented types and manifestations of violence). But morality, understood in suitably general terms, is one dimension of successive historical states and stages that improves over time; this is the case, in large part, because moral beliefs and practice are a form of knowledge (as Nielsen’s discussion of Engels helpfully reminds us),²⁷ which grows and is enriched over time: we learn more about the world; more about other people; more about the ways in which our actions affect others; and so on. This also means, it should be noted, that it is an error to consider Engels a moral relativist, despite the fact that he also claims, in the passage from which I have taken the preceding quotation,

Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb, it loses its vitality and justification.²⁸

While it is certainly not difficult to interpret this latter statement as an endorsement of moral relativism and to conclude that Engels is a relativist, I would contend that it is more accurate to regard both Marx and Engels as “contextualists,” to use the term employed by Nielsen in his analyses of the Marxist approach to moral matters. “For the contextualist,” Nielsen writes,

a changed objective situation justifies...[a] change [in moral principles]; for the relativist, attitudes...the societal, class, or individual belief-system... The first is something plainly objective; the second is not.

That is to say,

right or wrong, good or bad, is [for the contextualist] in considerable measure determined by the objective situation in which people find themselves. Thus, contextualism is not relativism in any form for what is right or wrong is not

²⁶ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 359.

²⁷ Nielsen, “Engels on Morality,” 53.

²⁸ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 359.

determined by what a person, culture, class, or whatnot believes to be right... or what canons of justification each will accept.²⁹

I find this argument quite convincing, but a fuller discussion of Nielsen's view and the considerations adduced by those commentators who identify Marx and Engels's position with moral relativism, would take us beyond the scope of present essay.

In any event, in considering Engels's conception of proletarian morality in *Anti-Dühring*, we should also note an important ambiguity in the text: in the passage that I just cited, Engels seems to have in mind the everyday moral beliefs and practices that typify workers in capitalist societies; however, in another passage (cited above), in which he refers to "the proletarian morality of the future," Engels seems to have in mind the moral outlook of the politically enlightened section of the proletariat, or that of what Lenin often calls the "class-conscious worker" or "class-conscious proletariat."³⁰ Kai Nielsen seems to believe that Engels was mainly referring to the latter, for he writes that the proletarian morality points to "an emancipation that will lead to a general human emancipation and to the construction of a human and classless society without exploiter and exploited, master and slave, ruler and ruled."³¹ To be sure, if, or to the extent that, we identify "proletarian morality" with the social and political aspirations of the class-conscious proletariat, which aims to establish a classless society, the proletarian morality surely does include the objective described by Nielsen in the passage cited. I believe, however, that Engels also has in mind the moral code of ordinary working people in advanced capitalist societies, elements of which do indeed anticipate the moral sensibility and ethos that will define a classless society, and which are, quite apart from the latter consideration, socially desirable in themselves. These elements include a highly egalitarian mindset; a prioritizing of cooperation; a commitment to solidarity; and a collectivist self-understanding. Such values and attitudes, integral to workers' experience in the workplace, are likewise constitutive of that "really human morality which stands above class antagonisms" evoked by Engels in *Anti-Dühring*,³² one that would make possible and exemplify "purely human sentiments in our intercourse with other human beings," to use a formulation found in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.³³ ("The proletarian morality of the future" really does correspond, in any event, to the

²⁹ Nielsen, "Introduction," 9; 8.

³⁰ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 394; 495.

³¹ Nielsen, "Engels on Morality," 51.

³² Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 88.

³³ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 377.

future: as Marx emphasizes in the “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” the communist society that emerges from capitalism will at first be “morally... still stamped” by the old, capitalist system).³⁴

There are three points that should be stressed in connection with the passages from Engels just cited. First, the “really human morality” of the future to which Engels refers is simply one aspect, or dimension, of that truly human *history* which, as Marx famously declares in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, can commence only after the disappearance of capitalism, the “social formation” with which “the prehistory of human society...closes.”³⁵ This “prehistory” is, in other words, a *moral* prehistory, too, insofar as social arrangements, structures and practices that humans have created but do not control constrain their moral agency, diminishing their freedom of decision-making and encouraging choices that are, for example, more self-interested, less impartial, less other-regarding and less rational than they ought to be. Secondly, and somewhat relatedly, a system of morals that “stands above class antagonisms” is needed – and constitutes a *sine qua non* for a “really human morality” – for the simple reason that the inequalities arising from class antagonisms make compliance with the axiom of *universalizability*, implicit in most conceptions of morality, an impossible demand. This axiom requires, roughly, that we must apply the same principle of right action to – i.e., moral obligations are the same for – all people who are similar (in the relevant respects) and find themselves in similar situations (in the relevant respects). But the kinds of inequalities produced by class distinctions affect both individuals and their circumstances, or situations, in morally relevant ways: they condition individuals’ abilities, needs, vital interests, life prospects, etc.³⁶ In this way, class distinctions significantly undermine the scope of application of the axiom of universalizability and, insofar as this is the case, represent an obstacle to the development of morality. They also represent an obstacle to morality owing to a corollary of this problem:

³⁴ Marx, “Gotha Programme,” 85; in the original German, the phrase “morally...still stamped” is “sittlich...noch behaftet” (“Kritik des Gothaer Programms,” 20). I use “communist” here because it is the term employed by Marx in this well-known passage, but many Marxists writing after Lenin would surely regard “socialist” as a more suitable description of the social order to which Marx is referring.

³⁵ Marx, “Preface,” 264. Trotsky states the same basic idea, but in a manner that is more directly relevant to our present concerns, in his *Literature and Revolution*, 14: “The historic significance and the moral grandeur of the proletarian revolution consist in the fact that it is laying the foundations of a culture which is above classes and which will be the first culture that is truly human.” Notice Trotsky’s use of the phrase “moral grandeur” in referring to the advent of the transition to a classless society.

³⁶ For passages from the early Engels bearing on this topic, see “Speeches in Elberfeld,” 245-6, and “Outlines of a Critique,” 432.

in circumstances in which substantial socio-economic differences make the application of the same moral principle to different individuals unfair, a commitment to fairness requires that we develop, and have the ability to apply, a plethora of moral principles, or the same principles in many, variously qualified forms; yet an excessive number of principles, or rules, diminishes the workability, and hence value, of a moral system. Finally, the social arrangement that makes a “really human morality which stands above class antagonisms” possible is also one which will, at the same time and somewhat paradoxically, reduce to a large extent the need for moral principles, or at least the scope of application of moral principles; this is so for the simple reason that, as noted earlier, the major source of social conflicts, antagonisms, and discord – class divisions – will have been eliminated.

Before leaving the topic of Engels's discussion of the proletarian morality and its relationship to a “really human morality,” let me note one important corollary of Engels's treatment of this question, which is the following: moral beliefs are not always *ideological*. I should clarify here that in using the term “ideological,” I have in mind Joe McCarney's definition of ideology, which holds that this concept, in the distinctively Marxist sense, refers to “thought which serves class interests” or, more precisely, thought which has this function in “the context of class struggle.”³⁷ If, as Engels states, there can be, and will be, morality – at least in the sense of a coherent set of moral beliefs – even after classes cease to exist (i.e., in a *classless*, communist society), then not all moral beliefs serve class interests and therefore not all of morality can properly be deemed “ideological.” The fact that some moral beliefs, practices and duties seem to have only the most tenuous, indirect connection with any phenomena bearing on the class struggle – obvious examples would include certain obligations to friends, children and the environment – together with the reality of “moral truisms,” which certainly constitute moral beliefs and which are valid for everyone, likewise support the conclusion that it is an error to hold that morality is always, necessarily, ideological in nature, at least in the Marxist sense captured in McCarney's definition.³⁸

The third element of Engels's view of morality that I wish to mention is Engels's resistance to, and criticism of, excessively reductionistic, mechanistic, and deterministic explanations of moral phenomena. It is important to stress this characteristic of Engels's thought, as it is, in general, easy

³⁷ McCarney, *Real World of Ideology*, 127; 5.

³⁸ Cf. Nielsen, “Engels on Morality,” 54. In thinking about these questions, it is helpful to bear in mind that, as Nielsen rightly puts it in “Marxism, Morality,” 34, “Being superstructural is only a *necessary* condition for being ideological. It is *not sufficient*” (emphasis in the original).

to interpret, and many of course do in fact tend to interpret, Marx and Engels's views on superstructural phenomena – religious notions, political and legal views, aesthetic tendencies, etc., as well as moral beliefs – in a very reductionist fashion. But it is also important because some of Engels's own comments on morality lend themselves to precisely this sort of interpretation. A case in point is this statement from *Anti-Dühring*:

The growing perception that existing social institutions are unreasonable and unjust...is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping.³⁹

We encounter a similar, seemingly very reductionistic claim in Engels's 1885 preface to a German edition of Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy*.⁴⁰

As a matter of fact, and as people who are familiar with the letters often referred to as Engels's "letters on historical materialism" (written to Joseph Bloch, Franz Mehring, Conrad Schmidt and Walther Borgius in the 1890s) will recall, the later Engels does explicitly acknowledge the *relative autonomy of the superstructure*.⁴¹ In other words, Engels grants, in keeping with these letters' insistence that historical materialism does not constitute a completely reductionistic and utterly mechanistic determinism, that developments in the forces and relations of production do not always dictate, shape and condition developments at the level of the superstructure, which, again, includes political and legal institutions, aesthetic, philosophical and religious ideas, and, of course, *morality*. But it is not merely the independent development of superstructural phenomena that Engels acknowledges in these letters from the final years of his life; he also acknowledges that elements of the superstructure can influence and shape ("react upon") the development of the forces and relations of production,⁴² and this, in turn, implies that morality – moral values, aspirations and beliefs – can influence and shape the development of the forces and relations of production. So, for example, the establishment of new rights regarding safety, privacy or welfare may lead to changes in the way in which production is carried out (new procedures and methods) and in what society produces. Likewise, a society's embrace of an environmentalist or ecological outlook might lead to the adoption of new restrictions on the ownership and control of natural resources, or to production methods that cause less pollution, or to industrial policies that are more environ-

³⁹ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 254-5.

⁴⁰ Engels, "Marx and Rodbertus," 282.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Engels, "Engels to Conrad Schmidt," 60-62, and "Engels to W. Borgius," 266.

⁴² Engels, "Engels to W. Borgius," 265; "Engels to Franz Mehring," 165.

mentally-friendly. The larger point here is that historical materialism can, to the extent that it grants at least some measure of autonomy to the development of superstructural phenomena, offer a more nuanced understanding of morality, and a more positive assessment of its role in social struggle, than some critics of Marxist thought would have us believe.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three aspects of Engels's approach to morality that I have mentioned – his elucidation of the class character of moral views; his defense of the claim that the moral outlook of the proletariat represents the most advanced morality; and his resistance to, and criticism of, excessively reductionistic explanations of moral phenomenon – afford us the rudiments of a distinctively communist outlook on morality and moral questions. And these ideas by no means exhaust the resources for such an outlook found in Engels's writings. One could also mention, for example, Engels's comments on the Marxist conception of – and demand for – social equality. Engels memorably formulates this conception and demand in *Anti-Dühring* as follows: “the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the demand for the *abolition of classes*. Any demand for equality which goes beyond that, of necessity passes into absurdity;”⁴³ and more than a decade later, in “A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Programme of 1891,” he would again underscore that “the abolition of classes is our basic demand.”⁴⁴ In short, social equality so understood is also a fundamental moral objective for Engels and the Marxist conception of communism.⁴⁵ One could likewise mention in this connection Engels's scattered remarks on the baneful effects of competition in capitalist society and the imperative of eliminating it in the future, post-capitalist world. Engels's early article, “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” offers a particularly forceful condemnation of the evil of competition, which is mentioned on numerous occasions in the essay;⁴⁶ and the implications of his observation, also found in this text, that “competition has penetrated

⁴³ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, 99; emphasis in the original.

⁴⁴ Engels, “Critique of the Draft,” 225.

⁴⁵ I am assuming here that equality is a moral and political good. It is surely relevant in this connection that, as Amartya Sen observed in *Inequality Reexamined*, 12, “every normative theory of social arrangement that has at all stood the test of time seems to demand equality of *something* – something that is regarded as particularly important in that theory” (emphasis in the original). For a useful overview of questions and topics that serve to illustrate the importance of equality to both morality and politics, see Baker, *Arguing for Equality*.

⁴⁶ Engels, “Outlines of a Critique,” 429; 431-2; 435; 439-40.

all the relationships of our life and completed the reciprocal bondage in which men now hold themselves⁴⁷ is, incidentally, as important to bear in mind today, when we urgently need an ethos of global cooperation if humanity is to avert ecological catastrophe and/or a thoroughgoing AI-induced dehumanization, as it was 180 years ago. There are, finally, numerous passages in which Engels more implicitly invokes moral considerations, as when he refers to capitalism as a social order in which “the needs of some are satisfied at the expense of others,”⁴⁸ or observes, also apropos of capitalist society, that “the great majority of its members is scarcely, or even not at all, protected from extreme want.”⁴⁹

In conclusion, Engels’s contribution to the moral perspective that defines what Manuel Sacristán would call the “communist worldview,”⁵⁰ or Engels himself calls “the Marxian world outlook,”⁵¹ is by no means negligible. Indeed, this contribution is, I would argue, greater than that of Marx, at least as far as explicit treatments of morality are concerned. Accordingly, morality is, in some sense, one of “the few special fields” – to quote a well-known footnote to *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*⁵² – in which Engels’s role in the development of historical materialism was decisive. The analysis of morality was *not*, in other words, a realm in which Engels played, to cite him once again, “second fiddle” to Marx.⁵³ To the extent, therefore, that moral commitments constitute an important component of Marxism as a social theory and political doctrine,⁵⁴ Engels’s contribution to the articulation of these moral commitments plainly merits more attention than it has received up to now.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁴⁸ Engels, “Principles of Communism,” 354.

⁴⁹ Engels, “Introduction,” 201.

⁵⁰ Sacristán, “Engels’s Task in *Anti-Dühring*,” 122.

⁵¹ Engels, “Preface to the Pamphlet,” 519.

⁵² Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 382: “I cannot deny that both before and during my 40 years’ collaboration with Marx I had a certain independent share in laying the foundation of the theory, and more particularly in its elaboration. But the greater part of its leading basic principles, especially in the realm of economics and history, and, above all, their final trenchant formulation, belong to Marx. What I contributed – at any rate with the exception of my work in a few special fields – Marx could very well have done without me. What Marx accomplished I would not have achieved.”

⁵³ Engels, “Engels to Johann Philipp,” 202.

⁵⁴ For a defense of the “moral” interpretation of Marxism and analysis of the affinities between Marxism and “ethical socialism,” see Llorente, “Marxism and Ethical Socialism.”

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