

The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Class Interest Theory of Ethics

By Scott Harrison

(Draft as of 6/9/08)

[Chapters 1 and 2 only]

“...show the people that there is neither a community of morals, nor of conscience, nor of opinion ever possible between different classes with opposed interests...” —Georg Eccarius (1852) [From a newspaper article that Marx assisted Eccarius in writing.¹]

Contents

Preface

Chapter 1: Introduction

- 1.1 What is Ethics?
- 1.2 A Brief Survey of Some Major Non-Marxist Ethical Theories
 - A. God's Fiat
 - B. The Golden Rule
 - C. Hedonism: Maximizing Pleasure and Minimizing Pain
 - D. Kantian Ethics: The Categorical Imperative
 - E. Ethical Relativism
- 1.3 Is There Such a Thing as MLM Ethics? (Lenin's Summary of Ethics)
- 1.4 Some Questions Concerning Proletarian Morality
- 1.5 Some Points of Terminology
- 1.6 The MLM Class Interest Theory of Ethics
- 1.7 Historical Materialism and Morality

Chapter 2: The Semantic Analysis of Moral Terminology

- 2.1 Methodology
- 2.2 'Good' as the "Dimension Word" in Ethics
- 2.3 Dictionary Definitions of the Word 'Good'
- 2.4 Various Wise Men on the Meaning of the Word 'Good' and Other Moral Terms
- 2.5 Determining What a Word Means
- 2.6 Defining 'Good' in terms of "Interests"
- 2.7 The Word 'Good' in Morals
- 2.8 Other Terms in Moral Discourse
- 2.9 The Word 'Interest'
 - A. Which Sense of the Word 'Interest' are We Interested In?
 - B. Who or What Can be Said to Have Interests?
 - C. Common, Collective Interests
 - D. Is 'Interest' a Moral Term?
- 2.10 The Clarifying Language of "Interests" versus Mystifying Moral Language
- 2.11 Did Marx Reject Morality?

Chapter 3: Morality Before Classes Existed

- 3.1 The "Morality" of Animals
 - A. Do Non-Human Animals Have Morality?
 - B. The Evolution of "Altruism" in Animal Behavior
 - C. "Selfish" and "Co-operative" Genes
 - D. Social Regulators: Biological and Cultural
- 3.2 Human Evolution and Cultural Development
- 3.3 The Origin of Morality
 - A. Morality as a Human Thing ["Man" as a social animal *par excellence*, etc.]
 - B. The Ideological Breakthrough in the Upper Paleolithic
 - C. Genuine Altruism
 - D. Innate morality? [Empathy in babies; Marc Hauser's arguments; etc.]
 - E. The Conscience
 - 1) General Discussion
 - 2) Neurological Basis for the Conscience
- 3.4 Morality in Primitive Communal Society
 - A. General Discussion
 - B. The Positive Side: A Primitive Version of Future Communist Morality

- C. The Negative Side: Tribal Interests, and the Prelude to Class Society & Morality
- 3.5 Human Nature, Morality and “Sociobiology”

Chapter 4: Class Society and Morality

- 4.1 The Advent of Classes
 - A. Social Classes
 - B. The Law of Motion in Primitive Communal Society
 - C. The Origin of Warfare
 - D. The Sweep of History, and the Here and Now
- 4.2 Primitive Class Society and Morality
 - A. What is So Special about Class Society?
 - B. How Different are the Various Class Moralities?
 - C. Morality and Social Pressure vs. Enforcement by Law and Violence
- 4.3 The Nature of the Collective Interests of a Social Class
 - A. Material Interests are Primary
 - B. Collective Interests vs. Individual Interests
 - C. The Fundamental Principle of Morality in Class Society
- 4.4 The Social Evolution of Class Society and Morality

Chapter 5: Bourgeois Morality

- 5.1 Introductory Comments
 - A. Individual Bourgeois Interests
 - B. Collective Bourgeois Interests
 - C. “Bourgeois Right”
 - D. The Fundamental Principle of Bourgeois Morality
- 5.2 The Bourgeois State and National Interests
 - A. The Bourgeois State
 - B. National Interests
 - C. Bourgeois Politics
- 5.3 The Bourgeois Ethical Theory of Individual Self-Interest
 - A. General Comments
 - B. Ayn Rand and Contemporary Libertarianism
 - C. Confusion between the Theory of Individual Self-Interest and the MLM Class Interest Theory of Ethics
- 5.4 The Bourgeois Embrasure of Religious and Idealist Ethics
- 5.5 The Inherent Contradictions in Bourgeois Morality (Hypocrisy)
- 5.6 Bourgeois Moral “Education”

Chapter 6: Proletarian Morality

- 6.1 The Proletariat and Proletarian Class Interests
 - A. The Proletariat
 - B. Non-collective Interests of Individuals and Families
 - C. The Real Long Term & Central Interests of the Proletariat
 - D. The Fundamental Principle of Proletarian Morality
 - E. Direct Implications and Subsidiary Principles
- 6.2 Proletarian Morality and Revolution
 - A. Proletarian Revolution as the Central Goal, the Encapsulation of Proletarian Morality
 - B. Violent Revolution
 - C. Insurrection and Civil War
 - D. Just Wars and Unjust Wars
 - E. Terrorism
 - F. What We Rule Out: Torture, Atom Bombs, Genocide
 - G. The Role of Proletarian Morality in the Revolution
 - 1) Why it is Better to Accept a Role for Morality Rather Than Reject it
 - 2) Sticking to the Moral High Road

- 6.3 Proletarian Morality and the Revolutionary Party
 - A. Relation of the Party to the Masses
 - 1) Commandism
 - 2) The Mass Line
 - B. The Moral/Political Basis of Party Rules and Democratic Centralism
 - C. The Moral/Political Importance of Democracy in the Party
 - D. Opportunism
 - E. Party Leadership; Personality Cults
- 6.4 Proletarian Morality in Socialist Society
- 6.5 Proletarian Moral Maxims
 - A. Make Revolution!
 - B. Stealing
 - C. Lying
 - D. Killing
 - E. Sexual Morality
 - F. Marriage and Divorce
 - G. Abortion
 - H. Drugs, Smoking, Alcohol
 - I. Other Forms of “Personal” Morality [Family relations, laziness, etc.]
- 6.6 Proletarian Morality and Art

Chapter 7: Conflicting Class Moralities

- 7.1 To What Extent Do Different Class Moralities Conflict?
- 7.2 Common Elements in Conflicting Class Moralities
- 7.3 The Essential Conflict between the Moralities of Different Classes
- 7.4 The “Fundamental Problem” of MLM Ethics

[Revise this section and base it on my comments in Avakian review.]

 - A. Outline the “Problem”
 - B. The Interests of Social Development and Progress
 - C. Serving the Whole through Championing the Part
 - D. The Collective Interests of the People as a Whole in Class Society
 - E. Choosing Between the Moralities of Opposing Classes

Chapter 8: Morality in Communist Society

- 8.1 The Fundamental Principle of Ethics in Communist Society
- 8.2 Communist Morality
 - A. General Outline
 - B. Comparison to Morality in Primitive Communal Society
- 8.3 Communist Morality Compared to Proletarian Morality
 - A. Abolition of Capital Punishment by the Time We Reach Communist Society

Chapter 9: Utilitarianism, Marxism and Interest Theories

- 9.1 Introduction: Why These Topics are Related
- 9.2 Early Utilitarianism
- 9.3 Jeremy Bentham and the Development of Utilitarian Ethics
- 9.4 Marx and Engels on “Interests”
- 9.5 Lenin on Class Interest Ethics
- 9.6 Mao on Revolutionary Utilitarianism

Chapter 10: Some Questions in Ethical Theory

- 10.1 Freedom and Necessity: Determinism and Freedom of the Will
 - A. Introduction
 - B. Determinism
 - C. Freedom of the Will
 - 1) Freedom as the recognition of necessity
 - D. Implications of determinism and free will for morality

- 10.2 Intentions and Consequences
- 10.3 Instrumental vs. Intrinsic “Goodness”
- 10.4 Ends versus Means
- 10.5 The Fallacy of the So-Called “Naturalistic Fallacy”
- 10.6 Is there Progress in Morals?
- 10.7 Is MLM Ethics Scientific? [Ethics as a branch of the social sciences.]
- 10.8 The Ethics of Science
- 10.9 Anthropocentrism
 - A. Do We Have Moral Obligations to Animals?
 - 1) General Principles
 - 2) The “Animal Rights” Movement
 - B. Non-Human Intelligent Beings
 - 1) Extraterrestrials
 - 2) Androids and Artificial Intelligence
 - 3) The Generalized Principle of Communist Ethics
- 10.10 A “Family Tree” of Ethical Theories

Chapter 11: Criticisms of MLM Interest-based Ethics

- 11.1 General Criticisms
 - 1) Who are the Critics?
- 11.2 The Charge that “Marxist-Leninists have no real ethical theory”
- 11.3 The Charge of “Simple Expediency”
 - 1) Two completely different sense of ‘expediency’
 - 2) Lenin’s “expediency”
 - 3) Summary
- 11.4 The Charge of “Inconsistency” or “Ethical Relativism”
- 11.5 Popper’s Charge of “Historicism”
- 11.6 Other Criticisms

Chapter 12: Pseudo-Marxist Ethical Theories

- 12.1 General Trends
- 12.2 Karl Kautsky
- 12.3 The Return to Kant: Eduard Bernstein & Nicholas Berdyaev
- 12.4 Agnes Heller (and Georg Lukács)
- 12.5 Herbert Marcuse
- 12.6 Howard Selsam
- 12.7 Soviet, Chinese & Other Modern Revisionists
- 12.8 Cornel West
- 12.9 Contemporary Kantian Arguments Against Interest-based Ethics
 - A. Introduction: Kant’s Influence is Still with Us
 - B. Bill Martin
- 12.10 Alain Badiou—A Pseudo-Maoist Obscurantist
- 12.11 Others

Conclusion

- General Summation of the Basic Arguments in This Book
- Final Remarks

Glossary

Bibliography

Preface

This is a book on ethics or “moral philosophy”. It is an attempt to expound, and to some limited extent to further develop, the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory of ethics along the lines begun in the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao.

None of the great leaders of the proletariat ever wrote a treatise on ethics and their writings avoid moralistic language. It is reported that “the moment anyone started to talk to Marx about morality, he would roar with laughter”.² At times these leaders even seem to suggest that the whole subject of morality is a bourgeois hoax. Nevertheless throughout their writings and lifework the most fervent and consistent moral stand is evident in their total devotion to the working class and the oppressed people of the world. And there is to be found in their writings all the essential points of the most profound theory of ethics.

My goal is not just to state the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory of ethics (which I will usually abbreviate as “MLM ethics”), but to show why it is correct. I view MLM ethics as a scientific theory, which must be established by scientific methods. Unlike many writers on philosophical subjects, however, I make no pretense that I am starting off unbiased. It should not be thought that using scientific methods precludes one from having an initial point of view; keeping an open mind does not require starting with an empty head.

The most general scientific tools are empirical investigation and theoretical analysis. Since our subject is ethics, the broad areas to be investigated and analyzed are human interrelationships and human society. The preeminent scientific discipline covering these topics is historical materialism, which was discovered by Marx. MLM ethics is thus a component part or sub-set of historical materialism. But other sciences also relate to human society, and two of them in particular will find considerable reference in this book: linguistics and anthropology. We will also make some reference to neurophysiology and cognitive psychology.

My means of establishing the MLM theory of ethics are:

- 1) Elaborating the theory, showing that it is internally consistent and coherent (despite claims to the contrary).
- 2) Showing that MLM ethics is consistent with the more general scientific theory of historical materialism.
- 3) Explaining why Marx’s distaste for moral language does *not* show that he “rejected morality”, let alone that he and other Marxists are “immoral”.
- 4) Answering all the objections I can locate which have been raised against MLM ethics, and showing that they are based on misconceptions or even almost complete ignorance of the theory.
- 5) Providing a linguistic analysis of moral terminology.
- 6) Discussing the biological basis for both the ideological aspect of morality and also for the partial physical internalization of morality in the brain (and the seat of the conscience).
- 7) Sketching the history of the development of morality in human society, especially in its development from primitive communist society to class society.
- 8) And, to a very limited degree, showing why other ethical theories are erroneous.

On the last point, I should stress that it will not be possible to consider in turn all the various idealistic ethical theories which have ever been thought up, let alone to do so in depth! The most I

can promise is to consider a few of them, especially those which seem to bear a resemblance to certain aspects of MLM ethics. I will also briefly look into a few of the other ethical theories which have been put forward by those who consider themselves to be Marxists or sympathetic to Marxism.

This essay, though fairly long in itself, largely consists of partially rewritten excerpts from an even longer (but incomplete) manuscript on MLM ethics which I mostly prepared way back in 1979. In that manuscript I got somewhat bogged down in the many technical aspects of lexical semantics and other secondary details. In this introductory essay to MLM ethics I avoid that problem by simply summarizing many of these technical issues and fine points.

Despite this pruning of excessive detail, however, some of the sections of this book may still seem overly technical to some. I am a little afraid that some readers may therefore find some parts of this essay to be a little off-putting. I can only suggest that such readers skim through the portions they find too technical or long-winded. Readers are under no obligation to pay equal attention to every part of every book they read! It does seem to me, however, that all this diverse material is appropriate and necessary to my subject.

I have made every attempt to face up to criticisms directed against MLM ethics, no matter from where they might come. In fact, I have purposely sought out as many bourgeois critiques as I could find, with the goal not of belittling and dismissing them, but rather of carefully considering these criticisms and answering them seriously. It is not that I am trying to “be fair” to bourgeois apologists and anti-communist professors; that doesn’t concern me in the least! But I do wish to show where their arguments genuinely fail so that these arguments cannot be used to confuse and mislead people.

In particular, I have tried to address the following issues very directly:

1) The charge that revolutionary communists have no real morality, but instead openly proclaim that they will resort to the crassest political expediency. I find it very curious, for example, that many, many bourgeois critics who dismiss MLM ethics as “mere expediency” quote from Lenin’s remarkable 1920 speech, “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues”³ in an attempt to prove their point. The fascinating thing here is that this speech by Lenin is actually a concentrated and most profound summation of Marxist-Leninist ethics, but the ethical theory actually presented there is completely lost on these critics.

2) What I (and some others, I learned⁴) call the “central” or “fundamental” problem of MLM ethics, the fact that we say that all moralities are class based, yet still insist that one class morality (proletarian morality) is “better than” another (bourgeois morality). This seems to suggest that we want it both ways, or that we are being inconsistent. The solution to this conundrum is not particularly difficult, but it is a fact that the criticism has been made over and over again and up until now a fully satisfactory reply has not been forthcoming.⁵

3) The question of ends versus means. A summary discussion of this is included in its own section (chapter 10, §4). But the issue is actually approached from many angles throughout the book, and especially in the sections discussing proletarian morality. Much has been written on the question of ends vs. means in relation to MLM ethics, and in fact the issue has really been accorded attention far beyond what it deserves from a theoretical perspective. I can only say that I am forced to give it as much space as I do simply because it has already been made into such a “big issue”.

4) The appraisal of Marxist/Leninist/Maoist practice from the standpoint of proletarian ethics. And here I must confront some hard questions, which have frankly not been confronted very well in the past: questions of the relation of proletarian morality to democratic centralism; the question of whether or not the discipline of the proletarian party should ever be rejected by its members; questions of the relationship between the party and the people from the standpoint of ethics, especially after the seizure of state power; etc.

Included here is the “Stalin question”. Evaluating Stalin—and Marxist practice in general—is not very difficult theoretically. The biggest problems are factual or historical—that is, determining what actually was done and why it was done. I freely admit that this difficulty itself implies a legitimate criticism of Marxist practice during the Stalin era, and to lesser extents before and after it—one of the issues we will get into in due course.

It is a fact that we Marxist-Leninists have not always acted in accordance with our own theories, ethical or otherwise. We have made mistakes, including some very serious ones. Some of these mistakes will be mentioned in the course of the book, in the Marxist spirit of summing up errors in order to help avoid repeating them in the future. On the other hand, a great many of the crimes attributed to us by the bourgeoisie are actually either not crimes at all, or are not things we have done, or are crimes committed by the bourgeoisie itself under our banner. Everything done by the Soviet Union and China since the overthrow of proletarian power in those countries comes under this last heading, and there is no reason for us to accept responsibility for the enemy’s actions. Many of the *bourgeoisie’s* crimes committed under openly capitalist regimes will also be mentioned as we proceed.

I claim no great originality for the ideas set down here. But on the other hand it is irrelevant to the theory here presented if I have inadvertently misinterpreted some of the ideas of others, be they the great Marxist theoreticians or non-Marxist writers. It is the theory of ethics presented in these pages which I am championing. My goal is not to be original but to be correct and clear. To a degree there is always a contradiction between being fully correct, and being quite clear, and I must confess that I have been somewhat more concerned with the first of the two. It is of course highly unlikely that I have fully achieved even this first goal and therefore I sincerely invite the reader’s comments and criticisms.

There is a glossary and a bibliography in the back pages.

* * *

Except within quotations, in referring to calendar dates I have adopted the convention used by the U.N. of referring to “BCE” (Before the Current Era) rather than “B.C.” (Before Christ), and “CE” (Current Era) rather than “A.D.” (anno Domini, Latin for “In the Year of Our Lord”). It is time we got rid of such lingering religious nonsense.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 What is Ethics?

What *makes* something good or bad, right or wrong? This is a question that people have discussed and argued about for at least 2,500 years. They have come up with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of different and conflicting answers. This might suggest that the question is very hard, or perhaps even unsolvable. Many have thought so. But actually, the answer is fairly simple. Even *proving* that this answer is correct is not tremendously difficult (though here, as elsewhere, any proof will be rejected by those who fail to comprehend its soundness).

The first roughly correct answer was discovered by the thinkers of the French Enlightenment several hundred years ago. A more precise answer, fully appropriate to contemporary class society, was discovered and elaborated on by Marx, Engels, Lenin and other Marxists. But still, this fairly simple, elegant and extremely compelling explanation of morality has by no means been widely adopted. Most people, indeed, have never been exposed to it at all. One obvious reason for this is that the capitalist ruling class always goes to great lengths to keep “dangerous” Marxist ideas away from the people. But it must also be admitted that we Marxists ourselves have so far not done a good job in putting forward our views on ethics, clearing up confusions and misconceptions, and replying to objections that have been put forward by bourgeois apologists. And many Marxists themselves have been quite confused and mistaken about ethics, arguing for all kinds of views such as those of Kant or the Bible—in the name of “Marxism”—or arguing that Marx “rejected” all morality. (I’ll talk about that claim in section 2.11.)

I started with the question: “What *makes* something good or bad, right or wrong?” That is the most basic question in ethics. Of course there are many other questions as well, such as:

- Why does morality exist among humans in the first place?
- When and how did morality originate?
- How come there are different opinions about what is right or wrong?
- What is a person’s conscience, and what is its relationship to morality?
- Why don’t people always do what they think is right?
- Does morality, what is right and wrong, change from time to time and from place to place?
- Is there such a thing as “moral progress”?

And of course there are specific questions about various human actions, such as:

- Are such things as lying or killing other people ever justified? If so, when?
- Is abortion right or wrong?
- Are wars ever morally justified?
- Is revolution morally justified? Even if it involves widespread loss of life?

Questions like these in this second group are questions of *morality*, that is, specific questions about what is right or wrong, good or bad. When you collect everything that one person has to say about all such questions, or what one group says, or one social class, or one whole society (i.e.,

the dominant views in that society), you have a specific *moral code*. *Ethics*, however, concerns itself not with directly answering these sorts of specific moral questions, or directly with constructing any moral code. Instead, it deals with the theoretical questions behind morality—such as what the real essence of moral codes are, how they arose, how they can be justified or discredited, the rational basis for choosing between them, and so forth. Of course most people who talk about morality either present ethical views at the same time, or at least imply them. And most of those who talk or write about ethics also present some of their specific moral views as well. I will too.

1.2 A Brief Survey of Some Major Non-Marxist Ethical Theories

Let's return to the most basic question in ethics once again: "What *makes* something good or bad, right or wrong?" What are some representative answers to this question which have become popular or fairly widespread? I'll just briefly mention a few of the most prominent.

A. God's Fiat. One very popular view among religious people is that whatever God says is right *is right*, and whatever God says is wrong *is wrong—just because God says it is*. Murder and cheating are wrong, these people apparently believe, *only because* God supposedly says they are wrong. If God hadn't said these things are wrong, they wouldn't actually be wrong! If God were to change his mind, presumably they then wouldn't be wrong any more! These are just a couple of the many severe difficulties with this theory.

Another rather obvious difficulty with it, for many of us, is that *there is no God*, just as there is no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny. There is certainly no scientific evidence for the existence of any "gods", and actually there are compelling scientific reasons to believe that all gods are simply pre-scientific fantasies which linger in a society that is only now finally beginning to get clear on their inherently impossible attributes.⁶ Even agnostics, those who claim not to know for sure whether or not there is a God, would seem to have insurmountable difficulties with any God-based ethical theory.

And even those who believe in God should still have some major problems here (if they were to actually think the matter over for a few minutes). Just how do you *determine* what God is supposedly "saying" is right or wrong? Should you wait until God speaks to you directly? What if he never does? Or should you accept the word of somebody else—maybe some mentally deranged stranger on the street corner?—who *claims* God has spoken to him about what is right and wrong? (Just why is it, do you suppose, that sensible people these days conclude that the making of such claims is in itself enough *to demonstrate* that a person is mentally deranged?! It is now known that many religious people with schizophrenia are prone to misinterpreting the "voices" they hear in their head as the voice of God.)

What most religious people do is accept the word of some old book like the Bible, which has a variety of conflicting things to say about right and wrong (such as "Thou shalt not kill" [Exodus 20:13] and "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"[Exodus 22:18]), along with various other sundry matters. It never seems to occur to these religious people to question the reliability, rationality, veracity, and perhaps even the sanity, of those who wrote their "holy book" in the first place!

Moreover, the Bible is by no means the only such old book which claims to present what "God" has to say about ethics and morality. Other religious people pick the Koran instead, or the

Torah, the Talmud, the Avesta (of Zoroastrianism), the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, or the sayings of Buddha or Confucius or some other guru—among many other “holy scriptures”. How does a person, even a religious person, “rationally” choose between these conflicting “authorities” as to what God has to say about morality (and other matters)? Well, obviously, rationality never has the slightest bit to do with it. In fact, most religious people simply adopt the “holy book” that they were *brought up to believe* is “the True word of God”. The relatively few who get “converted” generally just jump from one old book to a different old book.

In other words, while most religious people *claim* that they are following “what God says” is right or wrong, in actuality all they are doing is following their own family or cultural tradition on the matter. They just haven’t got the sense *to see* that that is all they are doing.

There is at least one other major problem for religious people with the notion that “God’s fiat” determines what is right or wrong: It means that it makes no sense (or is completely vacuous) to say that God himself is good! (The Bible explicitly says that God is good in Romans 11:22 and elsewhere.) You can hardly commend a person (or “entity”) for having correct views, if those views are *deemed correct* simply because they have them! More sophisticated religious people, such as Thomas Aquinas, recognizing this problem, have themselves rejected the theory that God’s fiat *determines* what is right or wrong. But, of course, most religious people—even Catholics, who nominally follow the teachings of Aquinas—are completely ignorant of such difficulties.

B. The Golden Rule. The “Golden Rule” is the precept that you should treat other people the way *you* wish to be treated. This is an extremely popular ethical theory among both religious and non-religious people. It is one of many conflicting ethical theories that are explicit or implicit in the Bible, which quotes Jesus as saying in the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.” [Matthew 7:12] One of the ethical theories in the Bible that is inconsistent with this⁷ is that of “an eye for an eye”: “And if *any* mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” [Exodus 21:23-25]

Although my grandmother once assured me that the King James version of the Bible was “God’s own language”, these days you usually hear the Golden Rule expressed something like this: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Incidentally, the Golden Rule is not exclusively (or even originally) a Christian precept. It has been a common theory in many diverse cultures, going way, way back. Confucius, for example, said “What you do not desire, do not effect on others” (even though that principle conflicts with some of his other principles).⁸

It is amazing how little sense the Golden Rule makes when you actually *think* about it critically. (Of course hardly anybody ever does! They repeat it *without much thinking*.) You should treat people the way you wish to be treated... OK, what if you really wish to be treated as *boss*, or *king*? Should you then treat all other people as your “boss” or as “kings”, bowing and scraping in abject obedience? Or consider a slave master: He would have others (his slaves at least) treat him as master, while he treats them as slaves. In light of the Golden Rule, should he start treating his slaves as his masters, and encourage them to treat him as their slave? (This might be poetic justice, but it would still hardly be the ideal moral society!)

Or what about masochists? Should they inflict pain on others just because that’s the way these totally screwed up people themselves want to be treated? Or what about someone who expects, and even wants, others to be cheats and crooks, because he figures he is better at it and

will come out ahead in any completely dog-eat-dog world? There are people like that, you know. (We live in a capitalist society, after all!) Does he then have a moral license to proceed with his chicanery and fraud?

George Bernard Shaw wrote “Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.”⁹ He was putting it in a humorous fashion, but there is some real truth behind his statement. Schopenhauer put it even better: “*Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t like done to yourself.* This is, perhaps, one of those arguments that prove, or rather ask, too much. For a prisoner might address it to a judge.”¹⁰

The basic problem with the Golden Rule is that it *assumes* that people are already moral, or basically so—which is very far from always being the case. *If* you are a good, fair and reasonable person, you will want good, fair and reasonable things done to you. And *in that case* it is indeed generally reasonable to say that you should do to others as you would have them do unto you. *But if you are not already a good, fair and reasonable person*, you may *not* yourself wish others to treat you in a good (moral), fair and reasonable way. And *in that case* it is very wrong for you to treat others as you would have them treat you. This is such an obvious point that it is really astounding that all the champions of the Golden Rule never seem to have even an inkling of it!

Insofar as it is a coherent ethical theory at all, the “Golden Rule” might actually amount to little more than a variety of ethical relativism. (See below.)

C. Hedonism: Maximizing Pleasure and Minimizing Pain. Another very common ethical theory is that pleasure is the greatest good, and pain the greatest evil. Therefore, morality consists in striving to maximize the amount of pleasure for everyone, and striving to minimize the amount of pain. Like most ethical theories, this sounds fairly plausible at first, but cannot withstand even a cursory critical examination.

For one thing, human beings have many other needs and interests besides pleasure and avoiding pain, and far more than just those two things goes into making the good life.

Suppose some society could be constructed where everyone (or at least most people) were both very happy and as free of all pain as could reasonably be arranged. But suppose this society was also an authoritarian dictatorship, where people had no political freedom, no control over their own lives, were severely exploited, and so forth. Perhaps this might be some sort of fascist society where the people were nevertheless psychologically “happy” because of both extreme indoctrination and the liberal availability of hallucinatory drugs. Obviously this would be a nightmare society, and not at all a moral society. Even a somewhat milder version of this sort of thing, such as is pictured in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), is a horrible nightmare.

The roots of this ethical theory, too, go way back. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) held that the practical goal of philosophy was to secure happiness (or at least to avoid all discomfort), and that pleasure was the sum total of happiness. The modern theory of “promote pleasure, minimize pain”, however, derives primarily from the utilitarians (most of whom would be better called “hedonists”, if that did not have such negative connotations). Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), in particular, is responsible for giving utilitarianism its hedonistic twist. Utilitarianism, as its name suggests, was originally concerned more with “utility” or “usefulness”, but critics raised the question of “useful for *what?*”, and that led Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and other utilitarians into this very one-sided hedonist perversion of what was originally a much more sensible ethical

theory. (I'll talk about this some more when I later discuss the relationship of MLM ethics to utilitarianism in chapter 9.)

Experiments have been done on lab rats that clearly demonstrate that there is a whole lot more to “the good life” than merely experiencing even the most intense feelings of pleasure. In the brain of all higher animals (and perhaps many of the lower ones as well), there is a region known as “the pleasure center”. Tiny wires have been inserted into this region of a rat’s brain, and things set up so that when the rat pushes a lever, its pleasure center is stimulated. The pleasure is so intense that the rat keeps pushing the lever over and over again, until it is physically totally exhausted and unable to continue. It may not even eat, drink, or do anything else. And eventually it dies. Human drug addicts are sometimes perhaps in a similar situation, although they generally still have the sense to at least pull away for some food, water, and sleep once in a while. Nevertheless, it should be obvious from examples like this that the simple-minded theory that “happiness and the avoidance of pain” are all that matters cannot reasonably be considered to be the sole basis of either the good life or of any sort of morality.

D. Kantian Ethics: the Categorical Imperative. The various elements of Kantian ethics are not widespread among the masses, in the way that the ethical theories mentioned above are. But Kant’s ethical ideas are still fairly popular among intellectuals, either as a whole package, or in part.

The most central and famous part of Kantian ethics is the notion of the Categorical Imperative. This doctrine has many formulations in Kant and by his followers, but probably the best known version is as follows: “Act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it be a universal law.”¹¹ The idea here is that nothing should be a moral maxim (or guide to moral behavior) unless it always applies, and unless it applies to everyone.

Antonio Gramsci noticed that there has to be an implicit rider on this principle, that only those *in a similar situation* can reasonably be “willed” to act in the same way, and that this addition essentially destroys the coherence of the whole notion:

Kant’s maxim “Act in such a way that your conduct can become a norm for all men in similar conditions” is less simple and obvious than it appears at first sight. What is meant by “similar conditions”? The immediate conditions in which one is operating, or the complex and organic general conditions, knowledge of which requires long and critically elaborated research? ...

Kant’s maxim can be considered as a truism, since it is hard to find anyone who does not act in the belief that in the conditions he is in everyone else would act in the same way. A man who steals for hunger maintains that hungry people steal; a man who kills his unfaithful wife maintains that all betrayed husbands should kill, etc. It is only “madmen” in the clinical sense who act without believing themselves to be in the right. This question is connected with others: 1. Everyone is indulgent towards himself, because when one acts in a “non-conformist” fashion one knows the mechanism of one’s own sensations and judgments and of the chain of cause and effect which has led one to act as one did; but one is much more severe with others because one does not know their inner life. 2. Everyone acts according to his culture, that is the culture of his environment, and as far as one is concerned “all men” means one’s environment, people who think like oneself. Kant’s maxim presupposes a single culture, a single religion, a “world-wide” conformism.¹²

People in very different circumstances are *bound* to have different ideas about what moral maxims (if any) should be upheld “by everybody, everywhere”; people in an exploited economic class for example versus people in the exploiting class.

Clearly Kant believed that this Categorical Imperative method would result not just in moral maxims that had validity only for one person in his or her immediate circumstances, but rather maxims with wide generality and which would apply to everybody everywhere. That is, maxims such as “Thou shalt not lie” and “Thou shalt not kill”. That sounds fairly plausible, until you *think* about it for ten seconds! Consider lying. We all agree that generally lying is a wrong thing to do. But anybody with even a little common sense knows that there are times when lying is not wrong. (This is why we have expressions like “a little white lie”.) And in fact, there are times when lying is not only *not wrong*, but in fact it would be wrong *not to lie!* (Consider an extreme case to prove the point: Suppose a berserk individual with an ax comes running into the room asking where some innocent child went and says “Tell me where the kid went or I’ll kill *you!*”. Should you tell him the child ran into the closet, refuse to answer at all, or should you lie? Only a Kantian would have problems with a question like this!)

As hard as it is to believe, Kant did in fact claim that lying is *always* wrong!¹³ And the absurdity of this shows that the Categorical Imperative approach is completely erroneous. Virtually all the common practical moral maxims (against lying, stealing, killing, etc.) are generally valid, *but not always valid*. And moral maxims themselves must be judged for their appropriateness in particular situations by reference to more important or more abstract moral principles. (More on that point later in the book.)

However, it is not just that the Categorical Imperative leads to unreasonable absolutes when it comes to generating various moral maxims (which in a less absolute form are generally reasonable). In addition to that severe problem, the Categorical Imperative principle—if taken seriously—leads to the generation of utterly absurd “moral maxims”, and this shows that the Categorical Imperative is a completely foolish idea which is unusable as a means of deciding on the morality or immorality of anything. Suppose, for example, that someone decides to become a shoemaker. Can we “will” that *everyone* should become a shoemaker? Of course not! If everyone did, then no one would be a farmer, and we would all starve to death! Hence, becoming a shoemaker must be highly immoral!¹⁴ (Becoming a Kantian philosopher is also extremely immoral, by that same “logic”!)

There are other aspects of Kantian ethics which are just as untenable as the Categorical Imperative. We will discuss some of them later in this essay.

E. Ethical Relativism.

And finally there is the view that *nothing* really makes anything “right or wrong”, “good or bad”, that these are merely arbitrary biases that people have, either in different cultures, or even individually. There seem to be three main motives for holding this view:

- 1) The argument from ignorance. (“I can’t figure out what makes human actions right or wrong, so it must be impossible to say.”)
- 2) Extreme cynicism about humanity. (“Everybody tries to justify what they say and do, but at bottom it is all just excuse making for doing whatever they selfishly want to do.”)

3) Learning about other cultures which have different ideas about right and wrong.

This third reason is why cultural anthropologists have been particularly prone to ethical relativism, and why the theory was first put forward in a systematic way by philosophers such as Edward Westermarck¹⁵ who were strongly influenced by the rise of modern anthropology. A number of cultural anthropologists have at various times gone to live with native peoples in various parts of the world and have found (to their evident surprise) that these peoples have somewhat different conceptions of morality, conceptions which seem to serve them just as well as the differing moralities of other cultures serve those societies. Since these anthropologists had also not thought through the basis for morality in their own society, they tended to jump to the conclusion that no particular morality is really “better” or “more valid” than any other, but rather that all of them are merely somewhat arbitrary conveniences for particular cultures.

More recently, this same sort of thinking has been generalized and spread to other academic departments, especially to English faculties at universities, in the form of “post-modernism”, which goes so far as to claim that the world views of the scientific community are really no better than those of native peoples living in the Amazon, or those of religious communities such as Christian fundamentalists who believe the world was created in 4004 B.C.! (Some people cannot recognize a *reductio ad absurdum* argument when they see it!)

As with some of the specific traditional explanations of morality surveyed above, there are no doubt some small and secondary aspects of truth to the relativist viewpoint. Different societies, with different ways of living and different levels of social production, do require somewhat different social norms and moral codes in order to function smoothly. But what the central core of the relativist viewpoint fails to understand is that there is a deeper level of analysis which will explain why the moral systems of different societies still have so much in common, and also explain the differences between them in terms of the same underlying analytical concepts. Once we have that explanatory analytical framework in place we will be able to more rationally discuss the differences between moralities in different forms and stages of society.

1.3 Is There Such a Thing as MLM Ethics? (Lenin’s Summary of Ethics)

We see, even from the short discussion above, that the most popular ethical theories around today are simply untenable. But is there a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist alternative? And what is the general MLM approach to ethics?

In his 1920 speech, “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues”, Lenin introduces the subject this way:

But is there such a thing as communist ethics? Is there such a thing as communist morality? Of course there is. It is often suggested that we have no ethics of our own; very often the bourgeoisie accuse us Communists of rejecting all morality. This is a method of confusing the issue, of throwing dust in the eyes of the workers and peasants.

In what sense do we reject ethics, reject morality?

In the sense given to it by the bourgeoisie, who based ethics on God’s commandments. On this point we, of course, say that we do not believe in God, and that we know perfectly well that the clergy, the landowners and the bourgeoisie invoked the name of God so as to further their own interests as exploiters. Or, instead of basing ethics on the commandments of morality, on the commandments of God, they based it on idealist or semi-idealist phrases, which always amounted to something very similar to God’s commandments.

We reject any morality based on extra-human and extra-class concepts. We say that this is deception, dupery, stultification of the workers and peasants in the interests of the landowners and capitalists.¹⁶

There is, then, a communist theory of ethics which is based on human and class concepts. What are these concepts? Lenin continues:

We say that our morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the proletariat's class struggle. Our morality stems from the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat.¹⁷

And a couple of pages later:

The class struggle is continuing and it is our task to subordinate all interests to that struggle. Our communist morality is also subordinated to that task. We say: morality is what serves to destroy the old exploiting society and to unite all the working people around the proletariat, which is building up a new, a communist society.

Communist morality is that which serves this struggle and unites the working people against all exploitation, against all petty private property...¹⁸

And again:

When people tell us about morality, we say: to a communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters. We do not believe in an eternal morality, and we expose the falseness of all the fables about morality. Morality serves the purpose of helping human society rise to a higher level and rid itself of the exploitation of labor.¹⁹

And finally:

Communist morality is based on the struggle for the consolidation and completion of communism.²⁰

So, according to Lenin, whatever serves the class struggle of the proletariat, whatever helps bring about proletarian revolution and the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, and whatever advances the transformation of bourgeois society into communist society, is in accordance with communist morality.

This view of morality has been generally accepted within the communist movement since Lenin's day, but not universally so. There have been those—and especially the more or less unremolded intellectuals from petty-bourgeois backgrounds who tend to be most preoccupied with such questions—who have been unsatisfied with Lenin's formulations and who have sought something better, something less "expedient", something more "profound". And of course in the camp of the enemy there are endless attacks on, and snide put-downs of, this "crude" communist theory of morality, even more so than against the other aspects of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory.

The fact is, whether Lenin's theory of ethics has been accepted or rejected, it has seldom been taken truly seriously. Bourgeois writers tend to dismiss it out of hand, without really considering if there might be an ethical theory of substance beneath it to investigate. The same goes for the revisionists, the hidden bourgeoisie. While the followers of Lenin have accepted Lenin's view,

they haven't thought about it much, or its deep significance. Nor have they adequately elaborated it and defended it.

It therefore seems to me that it is high-time that an extended defense of the MLM theory of ethics is put forward into the realm of the ideological class struggle. For I believe that not only are Lenin's views correct, but that they can be shown scientifically to be correct. Moreover, far from being a naïve, or superficial theory of "mere political expediency", as its enemies claim, the profundity of MLM ethics is of an order undreamed of by its numerous detractors. And, after all, is anything ever more profound than the truth?

1.4 Some Questions Concerning Proletarian Morality

It must be readily admitted that Lenin's speech gave only the briefest summary of the basic principles of proletarian morality, and he did not provide more than a hint as to how these principles could be justified. This has led many to believe that no such justification exists or can exist and that Lenin's stated principles of communist morality are pure unsupported dogma meant only to keep people from really examining the "immorality" of their revolutionary actions. In this essay I will examine in detail various bourgeois criticisms of Lenin's comments on morality. At present, however, I will confine myself to simply listing some of the questions that Lenin's comments raise, questions that must in fact be satisfactorily answered if MLM ethics is to be taken seriously:

1) Lenin said morality must be based on human and class concepts. What exactly does this mean? Lenin contrasted this to basing morality on God's commandments or idealist principles that come more or less to the same thing, but this still leaves a lot of room for explication of what human and class concepts are and why they are any better as a foundation for morality than are, for example, the Golden Rule or Kant's "categorical imperative".

2) What is so special about classes, as opposed, say, to nations, races, clans, families, or individuals? And in particular what is so special about the proletariat? Why should this *one* class be so central in the determination of morality? Isn't there an obvious and unjustifiable bias here?

3) Even if the proletariat is somehow special, why should morality be a matter of the proletariat's *class struggle* and proletarian *revolution*? Struggle and revolution inevitably involve force and violence which have traditionally been held to be at the very opposite pole from morality. How can views like Lenin's possibly be considered as *moral* principles? Aren't they more akin to such fascist crudities as "might makes right"?

4) Lenin talks a lot about the *interests* of the working people and those of the capitalists and landowners, etc. What is so important about "interests" in ethics? Aren't desires, pleasures, happiness—or any of a dozen other things—at least as important?

5) Lenin follows Engels and Marx in believing that different classes and different historical epochs have different moralities and says that "we do not believe in an eternal morality". Isn't this blatant ethical relativism? If a morality is not eternally correct why should it *ever* be correct? If there are many moralities are they all equally "valid"? And if not, doesn't there have to be an *ultimate* morality which enables us to say that one moral system (proletarian morality) is "better than" the others?

6) Lenin said morality—as accepted by communists—“is based on the struggle for the consolidation and completion of communism”. But why *communism* rather than some other form of society, or something like “world peace”? What is the connection here?

Questions like these are raised by bourgeois ideologists as part of their attempt to show that Marxist ethics is untenable, and thus to show that revolution is immoral. It is therefore important not only that MLM ethics *is* correct, but *also* that revolutionaries are able to *show* that it is correct by giving good answers to questions like these. We must wage a victorious struggle on the ideological front as well as on every other front.

1.5 Some Points of Terminology

Lenin used the name ‘communist morality’ for the moral principles he outlined in his 1920 speech, since these are (or should be!) the moral principles adhered to by communists in present-day society. But communists, going back to Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, also maintain that morality *in communist society* will be in many respects different from that of any class morality in class society—different even than the present morality of the revolutionary proletariat in capitalist society. (We will talk about this in much more detail later.) So in order to avoid confusion, in the rest of this book the name “communist morality” will be reserved for the system of morality which will exist in, and be appropriate for, communist society, after all socioeconomic classes have eased to exist worldwide. The moral principles which communists uphold today, while classes still exist, will be called “proletarian morality”.

In addition to this there is a distinction to be drawn between the terms ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’, as I briefly explained at the end of section 1.1. These words actually have diverse uses, and are often used interchangeably. But I will follow a common practice in philosophical writing and use ‘morality’ to refer to a system of moral principles, and ‘ethics’ to refer to the different theories behind—and justifying (or supposedly justifying)—the various systems of morality. Although the term ‘proletarian ethics’ might then be expected to apply only to the ethical theory behind proletarian morality, while ‘communist ethics’ might be expected to apply only to the ethical theory behind communist morality, I will not try to keep to such a distinction since there is, after all, a single, unified ethical theory behind *both* proletarian morality and communist morality. My preferred term for this ethical theory is simply ‘Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ethics’, but I will also frequently use the phrase “The Class Interest Theory of Ethics” since, as we will see, in the MLM view *class interests* are the real basis of, and the real key to, all present-day systems of morality.

1.6 The MLM Class Interest Theory of Ethics

The major purpose of this book is to demonstrate the validity of MLM ethics. It may therefore be appropriate to outline the central points of this theory before we begin the detailed discussion of its various aspects. This will give the reader the overall perspective to keep in mind as we proceed.

The central concept in the ethical theory behind the principles of proletarian morality summarized by Lenin is that of *class interest*. But this “class interest” theory of ethics explicates not only proletarian morality but also the various moral systems of other classes: it explains all such moral systems in terms of the basic class interests of those who develop and propagate them. When a particular moral principle proclaims, say, that it is wrong to steal, it is expressing, in the final analysis, the viewpoint of a definite class about its interests, especially its material interests.

This is not always obvious however since different classes may use these identical words to mean completely different things. The bourgeoisie, for instance, does not consider it stealing to exploit labor (to steal a worker's labor through the expropriation of *surplus value*), while the class-conscious proletariat for its part does not consider it stealing to take back what was stolen from it through exploitation.

To say that something is (morally) good or bad, right or wrong, is to say that it answers to, or satisfies, the interests of a particular class. It doesn't matter if a person understands this equivalence or not—objectively it is true. Generally people express the interests of their *own* class through their moral principles, but sometimes they do not correctly understand their own class interests. This is especially apt to be true of the lower classes which are always infected, to one degree or another, by the moral ideology of the ruling class.

Proletarian morality is based on, and expresses, the class interests of the proletariat. Now of course the proletariat, like all classes, has various kinds of interests, some more basic than others, some just momentary, others long-term, etc. Naturally the most basic interests take precedence over the less important ones. For the most part the most basic class interests of the proletariat, like those of every class, are those concerned with the material well-being of its members. The proletariat has, in short, basic interests in food, housing, clothing, health, transportation, education, and so forth.

The satisfaction of material interests such as these, and other more abstract interests as well (such as freedom, friendship, security, etc.), depends upon the socioeconomic system which exists, the nature of the prevailing class relations, and so forth. It is an objective fact that capitalism, and class society in general, cannot satisfy the material and other interests of the proletariat, and therefore the basic interests of the proletariat—and hence proletarian morality—*require it to overthrow capitalism and abolish all class exploitation.*

The class struggle, proletarian revolution, and the advance of society to communism are all morally justified *because* they are the only way to satisfy the basic interests of the proletariat and the rest of the masses. All the principles of proletarian morality are subordinate to this one fundamental principle: whatever answers to the interests of the proletariat is right. On the other hand, the moral justification of proletarian revolution and the achievement of communist society follow immediately from this general principle since all the basic, long-term interests of the proletariat are encompassed and encapsulated in communist revolution.

Since the basic class interests of the proletariat require it to lead all society to the stage of communism, where all classes have ceased to exist, it also follows that in liberating itself from exploitation and oppression the proletariat necessarily liberates all humanity. In communist society all humanity will have the same basic collective interests and society will exist to satisfy those interests. Therefore proletarian morality is not just another class morality, no better nor worse than any of the others. On the contrary, proletarian morality is higher (better) than any other class morality because it is not only in the interests of the proletariat but also in the *ultimate interests* of humanity as a whole to advance to communist society.

That is the gist of the MLM theory of ethics. It remains now to elaborate on and back up all these assertions.

1.7 Historical Materialism and Morality

Historical materialism is the science of society. It is the result of the application of Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, to the history of society. I will not attempt here to give an extended exposition of the tenets of historical materialism. However, there is no better brief summation of it than that given by its discoverer, Karl Marx, in the Preface to his 1859 book, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their existence, men enter into definite, necessary relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is merely a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within the frame-work of which they have hitherto operated. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. At that point an era of social revolution begins. With the change in the economic foundation the whole immense superstructure is more slowly or more rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic, in short, ideological, forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such an epoch of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production.... The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of an individual antagonism but of an antagonism growing out of the social conditions of existence of individuals; but the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society simultaneously create the material conditions for the solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society therefore closes with this social formation.²¹

The agency which arises in capitalist society and which is destined to destroy it is of course the working class, the *proletariat*. In summing up the experience of the 1870 working class insurrection known to history as the Paris Commune, Marx added another tenet to the theory of historical materialism, namely that the proletariat could not simply seize the existing bourgeois state but must destroy it and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie to prevent their comeback. The proletarian dictatorship must exist throughout the period of transition from bourgeois society to communist society. Like every scientific theory of any scope, historical materialism has been further developed over the years, most notably by Lenin and Mao Zedong. But the points discovered by Marx remain as its foundation.

The aspect of historical materialism which must command our present attention is its theory of ideology. Although not specifically mentioned by Marx in the above passage, on other occasions Marx and Engels insisted that morality must also be considered as ideology and hence part of the superstructure of society. ‘Ideology’ means, in its most general use, the totality of people’s ideas, views, and concepts. In class society these ideas, views and concepts are divided along class lines; ideology becomes the ideology of definite social classes, and reflects their interests. Although ideologies are reflections of the socioeconomic relations of production, they are not merely passive reflections but react in turn upon the economic base, and either serve to advance or hinder the further development of society depending upon which class they represent. And although ideologies do reflect the material interests of one class or another, and hence the

economic relations which exist in society between the various classes, this relationship is not always completely straightforward or mechanical. Particular ideologists are sometimes the product of conflicting class influences, and in addition to this, many specific ideologies have a historical development of their own which is not necessarily directly relatable in all its particulars to the overall development of society.

Let us then apply the general point of view of historical materialism to the question of morality. We obtain the following principles:

- 1) Morality changes over the course of history.
- 2) Morality changes in accordance (more or less) with the changes in the socioeconomic form of society.
- 3) Each class in any society has its own system of morality.
- 4) The dominant morality in any society is that of the ruling class (at least once it is firmly entrenched).
- 5) Each class morality is based, in the final analysis, upon the collective interests of the members of that class, primarily their material, economic interests.

These conclusions of historical materialism with respect to morality are of course compatible—in fact identical—with some of the basic tenets of the MLM theory of ethics as outlined in the previous section. I take this as scientific evidence in favor of MLM ethical theory (or at least part of it) because historical materialism is in my opinion a valid scientific theory, and moreover a much more general and powerful scientific theory capable of entailing more particular conclusions. I recognize that this will carry absolutely no weight with those who do not accept historical materialism as correct. I refer them to the other arguments in favor of the MLM theory of ethics which will come later.

But there are people who *have* claimed to accept the basic theory of historical materialism—people such as Eduard Bernstein, Nicholas Berdyaev (in his younger days), Georg Lukács and Herbert Marcuse, to name a few—who have nevertheless opposed the class interest interpretation of MLM ethics and have put forward instead ethical theories inconsistent with historical materialism. It is therefore not a trivial thing to point out the compatibility between historical materialism and the class interest theory of ethics.

Chapter 2: The Semantic Analysis of Moral Terminology

2.1 Methodology

As stated earlier, the broad areas to be investigated and analyzed with respect to ethics are mostly human relationships and human society. For example, it will obviously be relevant and useful to investigate the origin of morality in primitive human society insofar as this is possible, and so anthropology is one relevant science. But there are also other sciences with considerable relevance to ethics but which have only tangential connections to human society *per se*. One of these is neurology, where we will later investigate one small topic, namely the physical location in the brain of the seat of the conscience, and what is known so far about the neural connections to that area of the brain.

But there is one treasure house of information right at our finger tips—perhaps we should say “right at the tips of our tongues”—which must not be overlooked: our language. The questions “What is morality?” and “What is good?” are obviously closely connected with the questions of scientific linguistics, “What does the word ‘morality’ mean?” and “What does the word ‘good’ mean?”.

Sometimes it is said that philosophers who concern themselves with language are concerned only with ideas and ignore the real world. And yet language is part of the world. Human languages must necessarily reflect the realities of human existence and human society (though of course they also reflect, in part, human fantasies). Otherwise language would be of no use to us.

There are indeed pitfalls to watch out for here. In *The German Ideology* (1846) Marx and Engels wrote:

One of the most difficult tasks confronting philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. *Language* is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life.

We have shown that thoughts and ideas acquire an independent existence in consequence of the personal circumstances and relations of individuals acquiring independent existence. We have shown that exclusive, systematic occupation with these thoughts on the part of ideologists and philosophers, and hence the systematization of these thoughts, is a consequence of division of labor, and that, in particular, German philosophy is a consequence of German petty-bourgeois conditions. The philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realize that neither thoughts nor language themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life.²²

In considering the use of moral terms in English, therefore, we must be sure that we are conducting an empirical investigation of the ordinary language and not an investigation of a distorted language incorporating ideological biases, and bearing a consequent distorted relationship to the real world.

But what of the “ordinary language” itself? Is it free of all ideological distortion due to the domination of the ruling class in every sphere? No, it is not. Marx and Engels gave the following convincing example of this:

For the bourgeois it is all the easier to prove on the basis of his language the identity of commercial and individual, or even universal, human relations, as this language itself is a product of the bourgeoisie, and therefore both in actuality and in language the relations of buying and selling have been made the basis of all others. For example, *propriété*—property [*Eigentum*] and characteristic feature [*Eigenschaft*]; property—possession [*Eigentum*] and peculiarity [*Eigentümlichkeit*]; “*eigen*” [“one’s own”]—in the commercial and in the individual sense; *valeur*, value, *Wert*; commerce, *Verkehr*; *échange*, exchange, *Austausch*, etc., all of which are used both for commercial relations and for characteristic features and mutual relations of individuals as such. In the other modern languages this is equally the case. If Saint Max [Max Stirner] seriously applies himself to exploit this ambiguity, he may easily succeed in making a brilliant series of new economic discoveries, without knowing anything about political economy; for, indeed, his new economic facts, which we shall take note of later, lie wholly within the sphere of synonymy.²³

Language does reflect the realities of society, and these social realities include the prevailing relations of production, the ruling position of one class, and so forth. *In addition to this* there are words and phrases in every language which embody the ideologies of the classes which exist in that society (e.g., ‘free enterprise’, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’). Most of these words and phrases are not the property of just one class but have different uses, different meanings, or at least different connotations when used by class conscious members of opposing classes (e.g., ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’).

However, as Stalin pointed out in *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, language as a whole is not the creation or property of any single class but of society as a whole. To say that there are “class languages” is to speak hyperbolically. Language is, furthermore, not part of the superstructure on any socioeconomic base; it is a historical phenomenon created by all classes through the course of various socioeconomic formations and is not replaced with the change of the economic system. Speaking on this point Stalin says:

Yes, classes influence language, introduce into the language their own specific words and expressions and sometimes understand one and the same word or expression differently. There is no doubt about that.

However, it does not follow that specific words and expressions, as well as differences in semantics, can be of serious importance for the development of a single language common to the whole people, that they are capable of detracting from its significance or of changing its character.²⁴

Stalin goes on to say that the words and expressions which the various classes introduce, or understand each in their own way, are very few in number. For my part, I think that the class influence on language is considerably greater than Stalin suggests. But what we really need to know here is if the *particular* moral words we are concerned with (such as ‘good’) are among these relatively few class-biased expressions. The answer to this, as with many such simplistically formulated questions, is “yes and no”.

The means of showing the extent to which class viewpoints modify the meanings of various moral expressions is, however, the same sort of procedure as is used to show the root meanings of these words and phrases. In other words, in so far as different classes have modified the meanings of words (in general or in specific contexts) this will become evident in any complete and truly scientific investigation of the meaning of those terms.

But there is a more basic question here. No one can seriously defend the view that the way to scientifically investigate political economy is to study *language*! (Even those benighted individuals such as Max Stirner who have actually followed such a method do not recognize that they are doing so.) This is so even though a scientific study of linguistic terms related to economics would indeed tell us something about the bourgeois relations of production which presently exist in the real world and which are reflected in language, as Marx and Engels noted in the quotation above.

So if the investigation of political economy, or physics, or biology by the method of analyzing the “relevant” linguistic terms in these various sciences is such an obviously absurd procedure, why should philosophy be any different—even if we do restrict ourselves to ordinary language? This question arises only because of a very basic confusion about what philosophy is.

To help straighten this out let’s consider for the moment not philosophy, but the science of linguistics itself. Part of linguistics is the investigation into the meanings of words—lexical semantics. Thus, even though linguistics is just as much a science as is physics, it inquires into ordinary language concepts while physics doesn’t *because* the meaning of words is (part of) what the science of linguistics is *all about*.

Every science, including physics and linguistics, has a stock of technical terms, that is, words which are defined in terms of the theories of that particular science. Words like ‘force’ or ‘mass’ in physics, for example, are defined within the body of current physical theory and have meaning only in light of that theory *despite* their concurrent but *irrelevant* use in ordinary language. (Of course the use of ordinary language expressions such as ‘force’ and ‘mass’ tends to follow their technical uses in physics—and this is a good thing. To the greatest extent possible ordinary language should change to reflect current scientific theory.) When physical theory advances, the meanings of such technical expressions may well be changed. In linguistics there are many technical terms such as ‘phoneme’, ‘morpheme’, ‘allomorph’, etc., which should not be confused with ordinary language words which linguistics (semantics) inquires into the meaning of. Despite the fact that linguistics investigates the meanings of ordinary words in natural languages by scientific procedures, it does not determine the meaning of its own technical expressions in the same manner. As in any science, these technical terms are simply assigned meanings by fiat in the course of propounding scientific theory. The entire theory is then compared to the real world to test its correctness.

Philosophy, properly speaking, may well consist only of the laws of logic and dialectics (as Engels remarked in *Anti-Dühring*²⁵) together with a materialist conception of the world. But the separate sciences we have today all started out as areas of philosophical speculation (in the conventional sense) and only split off when they started to become something more than mere speculation. Furthermore, over the centuries numerous linguistic confusions and errors of semantics have become entrenched in traditional philosophy. The multitude of idealistic and metaphysical philosophical views embody all kinds of misconceptions about the world and about language. The history of philosophy is replete with such nonsense as “The concept of perfection includes the concept of existence; therefore God exists.” Although the real sources of such error and confusion are primarily the various reactionary class ideologies, and not language, to a significant extent philosophical confusion and error is fostered by the simple failure to understand the meaning of various key words. The motive is reactionary class outlook; the means is abuse of language.

It is true that what is called linguistic analysis or “ordinary language philosophy” is actually linguistics (semantics) and not philosophy at all. But why quibble about this? In order to expose (most) philosophical errors and confusions it is necessary (*among other things!*) to scientifically analyze the meanings of certain problematic words. Since this has yet to be adequately done (in most cases) by professional linguists there has grown up a tradition in the period after World War II—and especially in English speaking countries—of professional philosophers attempting to do it under the name “philosophy”. Many have even gone so far as to assert that this is *all* there is to philosophy, thus carrying the trend to the ridiculous extreme of defining traditional philosophy out of existence altogether, along with its rational core of materialist dialectics.

It is true that the results of this linguistic philosophy have been limited and spotty, at best! I believe that this is largely to be explained by the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois class stand of these philosophers; the fact that they are hobbled by the same old reactionary motives in philosophy even while questioning the means by which it has been conducted in the past. Among other things this has resulted in linguistic, “ordinary language”, or analytic philosophy (as it is variously called) focusing mostly on very trivial questions. I once wrote the following ditty to make fun of this tendency:

Analytic Philosophy

To analyze is to figure out
What the world is all about
But to do it safely and not offend
Analytic philosophy came in the end
To work on trivial concepts which
In no way could upset the rich.

On the whole, analytic or linguistic philosophy has been either trivial, reactionary, or both!²⁶ Nevertheless, it is a good thing to add the techniques of scientific linguistics, and especially lexical semantics, to the philosophical toolbox. It can be a powerful tool in the battle against reactionary philosophical views which have managed to survive (and be continually reborn) partly because of semantic confusion.

There is a point to linguistic analysis in philosophy (unlike economics or physics) in so far as it is a task of philosophy to knock down the fantastic “philosophical language” of reactionary philosophers, and to put such traditional branches of philosophy as ethics on a completely scientific basis. Repeating once more the comment of Marx and Engels: “The philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realize that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life.”²⁷

I conclude, therefore, that a semantic investigation of the meaning of key terms in people’s talk about morality is highly appropriate in ethics. Moreover—and this is why this is *most* important—this semantic investigation will demonstrate that there is indeed something rather fishy about moralizing and moral terminology; it exists more to *hide* the essential nature of morality, rather than to bring it out! And this, we will see, explains Marx’s antipathy to using moral language.

2.2 ‘Good’ as the “Dimension Word” in Ethics

I propose to focus the investigation of the semantics of moral terms on the word ‘good’. Why ‘good’ rather than ‘right’, ‘justice’, ‘duty’, ‘ought’, or some other moral term?

Moral terms are obviously closely related. That is, their *meanings* are similar; so similar in fact that in many contexts one moral term can replace another without much, if any, change in the meaning of the utterance as a whole. Because the meanings of moral terms are so interrelated it is possible to paraphrase the meaning of any one of them in terms of another. Thus it is possible to give at least a rough, more or less adequate, definition of ‘ought’ in terms of *right* and *wrong* or conversely a more or less adequate definition of ‘right’ in terms of *ought*. The statement that “one ought to do what is right”, is thus very nearly a tautology. Similarly, the question which is sometimes debated by bourgeois moral philosophers, “Why should I be moral?”, is really quite nonsensical. It is hardly any different than asking “Why should I do what I should do?”.

The fact that moral words can be given rough definitions in terms of each other has led to a great deal of superficial “analysis” in ethics. The game is played thus: one moral word is defined in terms of a second, the second in terms of a third, and so on until we come to the last moral word on the list which is declared to be so “fundamental”, so “obvious”, so “unanalyzable”, that nothing more can possibly be said. The listing of related moral words is passed off as real analysis.

Crane Brinton provides us with an illustration of this in his book *A History of Western Morals*²⁸ where he defines ‘good’ (in morals) as meaning ‘morally desirable’ and ‘bad’ as ‘morally undesirable’. ‘Ethics’ and ‘ethical’ he defines in terms of ‘ought’, and the ethical “component” of ‘morality’ is basically defined in terms of ‘ought’ as well. But ‘ought’, which he has made into his keyword, he doesn’t define. “Only the very self-conscious semanticist,” he says, “will try to pursue that word ‘ought’ further; it is surely one of the clearest of words...”²⁹ Actually ‘ought’ too can be defined in terms of other moral words and phrases, such as in terms of “moral obligation” or “duty”, etc. Thus other writers have thought ‘duty’ was the “clearest” or most fundamental moral word which itself needed no further comment. Still others have settled on ‘right’, or ‘good’, or ‘justice’. At one time or another probably every single moral term has been picked out as *the key* with which to explicate all the rest. But what then is to explicate the key? In point of fact *any* moral term *could* serve as our starting place, as our keyword or focus for analysis. But the thing to be emphasized here is that the selection of the “key” does not mark the conclusion of a proper analysis but its beginning.

Am I saying then that it is completely arbitrary which moral word we focus our analysis on, that it makes no difference at all? No. We *could* select any moral term, but there are good reasons to select ‘good’. The various words in moral discourse do not mean *precisely* the same thing—even those which can often be substituted for each other. In other words, in addition to the elements of meaning which they have in common there are other elements of meaning which they do not share. These other elements are more complicated or less complicated, more specific or more general, in different instances. So some moral words are a little simpler to analyze than others—though none are intractable.

In English the most general, most abstract, and hence most straight-forward word in moral language is the word ‘good’. This has been recognized by a number of people including the British philosopher of “ordinary language” John Austin who described ‘good’ as a “dimension-word”, that is, as “the most general and comprehensive term in a whole group of terms of the same kind, terms that fulfill the same function.”³⁰ Unfortunately Austin somewhat spoiled this

fine insight by going on to state that the function of all the words in ‘good’s “dimension” is that of expressing commendation, which is not correct. (When I say that so-and-so is a good liar I am not ordinarily commending him!)³¹ One could also dispute certain other aspects of Austin’s formulation, such as the implicit claim that all moral words have the same “function”. But the most important point here is that among a group of semantically related words there is often a keyword, a dimension word, more general and abstract, and hence more basic, in a sense, than the rest.

The word ‘good’ is the most general and most basic moral term (though it is not *exclusively* a *moral* term). It is therefore the easiest and most convenient term to focus on for the semantic analysis of moral language. But I want to state again that ‘good’ is not an all-important or indispensable term. The bourgeois philosopher Paul Ziff, from whom I have learned much about the semantics of the word ‘good’ and lexical semantics in general, put it this way:

The word ‘good’ is not important. It is useful, not indispensable. One can say whatever one wants to say without using it. This would entail only loss of brevity: what can be said and what can be said briefly are not the same.³²

Well, I think the word ‘good’ *is* rather important, and so evidently does Ziff, despite his comment here, since he wrote a whole book whose culmination was the statement of what the word ‘good’ means. But his point about ‘good’ not being indispensable is very well taken. The same thing goes, incidentally, for all other moral terms. They are all dispensable, either individually, or as a group. This is a point we will come back to.

2.3 Dictionary Definitions of the Word ‘Good’

What does the word ‘good’ mean? A familiar method of determining what a word means is to look it up in a dictionary.

If you look up the word ‘good’ in a good dictionary you will find a long list of definitions of the most diverse character. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (Unabridged)*³³, for instance, has a whole page of fine print devoted to ‘good’ and its various combined forms (‘goodness’, ‘good morning’, etc.). Leaving the combined forms aside, this dictionary divides the definitions into three broad groups corresponding to the three parts of speech—adjective, noun and adverb—and assigns each a separate entry. It lists several senses, sub-senses and even sub-sub-senses for its three entries. The adjective, for example, is assigned two main senses, the first of which is assigned six sub-senses, each of which is in turn assigned from three to nine sub-sub-senses. A total of 71 different definitions is given under the three entries (again not counting combined forms), with one or more example contexts for each. This dictionary thus tells us what the word ‘good’ means in each of 71 different contexts, and in each of these no doubt carefully chosen contexts it means something different from what it means in all the others. What then does the word ‘good’ mean “in general”? It doesn’t say! Moreover, the common relationships among the various meanings of the word which allow them to be grouped together as sub-senses (or sub-sub-senses) of a distinct sense are not stated either. These are remarkable omissions, and are none the less remarkable for the fact that it is standard procedure for dictionaries whenever an entry is given more than a single “sense” (definition).

In other words, this dictionary, like most others, fails to give an *overall*, or *central*, or *standard*, or *core*, or *root* definition of the word ‘good’, and fails even to give root definitions of the main senses and sub-senses of the word. It “simply” (of course this is really no simple matter)

gives a large number of definitions of the word ‘good’ as it appears in various contexts without specifying anything which these various uses may have in common (either all of them or a subset of them). It arbitrarily lists 71 definitions of the word as it appears in the given sample contexts, but it could just as well have listed 100 or 700 definitions together with sample contexts if it had the space and perseverance, and the determination to make more and more subtle distinctions and to locate more and more exceptional uses of the word.

Why do dictionaries tend to define words in particular contexts, but shy away from defining them in general? It is clearly because it is much easier to do the former than the latter, and because it is very easy to go wrong in trying to give the “core” or “root” or “general” meaning of a word that has diverse specific meanings in many different contexts. We see this in fact with the word ‘good’. Some of the few large dictionaries that have attempted to give the root or overall meaning of the word ‘good’ are British dictionaries (e.g., the *Oxford English Dictionary*) which have been unduly influenced by the erroneous theory of the British philosophers John Austin and R. M. Hare that ‘good’ means “commending”.³⁴ It is actually better not to try to say what the overall meaning of a word is than to give the wrong answer!

So we cannot determine what the word ‘good’ means simply by looking it up in even the best of the currently available dictionaries since the dictionary makers have either not completed their job, or else have not completely correctly stated what the root or overall meaning of the word is. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* put it,

Good dictionaries offer a variety of contexts for the items listed, but, obviously, this is not enough. For one thing, no dictionary can list all the co-occurrences [of the word in question with all the other words it can occur with –JSH]. There must be devices to sum up, as it were, the information revealed by the contexts. This is the role of dictionary definitions.³⁵

The bigger and (in general) better dictionaries currently do a fairly good job of giving definitions covering each of the specific contexts they list, but either shrink from the attempt to give definitions covering groups of related contexts (let alone *all* contexts), or else do a rather inept job of it in many cases. Oddly enough, this sometimes means that you can get a better *overall* (root) definition of a word from a smaller, even “inferior” dictionary than you can from a “good” large dictionary! Thus *Webster’s Basic English Dictionary*³⁶ gives just 9 definitions for the adjective ‘good’, the first of which is “suitable for a use: SATISFACTORY”. This is quite close to the actual overall, general meaning of the word.

Even when a dictionary *does* provide us with an overall or core definition of ‘good’ the question still remains whether or not that definition is fully correct. Most people do not realize how many errors there are in dictionaries—even “good” dictionaries. Alfred North Whitehead put it this way: “Learning preserves the errors of the past, as well as its wisdom. For this reason dictionaries are public dangers, although they are necessities.”³⁷ Thus when it comes to problematic words, especially words which figure prominently in philosophical disputes, dictionaries can be of only limited use and reliability until the day when they are prepared by more consistently scientific methods.

2.4 Various Wise Men on the Meaning of ‘Good’ and Other Moral Terms

What then *does* the word ‘good’ mean? This is something about which there are many ideas and much disagreement. There are those, indeed, who claim that ‘good’ doesn’t mean *anything* “in general”—that there is nothing which this word, or any other word possibly, has in common

in all its uses or contexts. (We will look into this idea later on.) But most writers have thought that such a general or root meaning does exist and have “merely” differed as to what that meaning is.

Here are a few examples of such definitions of ‘good’ showing just how wildly diverse they can be. It is, at the same time, a somewhat wider survey of various ethical theories than I gave in section 1.2, since the meaning of the word ‘good’ is so central to ethics. (In a few of these examples I have quoted what various people have said about other moral terms, and ask the reader to adapt it to the word ‘good’. For example, William Paley’s views below about the word ‘right’ can easily be adapted to the word ‘good’. Also, strictly speaking, many of the following are comments on what “the good” is, rather than on what ‘good’ means; I take these to be closely related things, though the phrase “the good” sounds peculiar to me, in the same way that “the purple” or “the small” sound peculiar.)³⁸

1) God’s dictates or whims—the view that what is good is whatever God says is good: Melvin Rader remarks that “In the Old Testament... we have the stories of God’s command to Adam, his covenant with Abraham, and his dictation to Moses of the Ten Commandments. The Book of Manu (*circa* 250 B.C.), an authoritative source of moral law for Hindus, is declared to be an emanation from the Supreme God. The moral teachings of Islam are likewise represented as a direct revelation from God, communicated word for word to Mohammed by the Angel Gabriel.”³⁹ Another example: “... right therefore signifies consistency with the will of God...” (William Paley)⁴⁰

2) Teleological definition: “It is thought that every activity, artistic or scientific, in fact every deliberate action or pursuit, has for its object the attainment of some good. We may therefore assent to the view which has been expressed that ‘the good’ is ‘that at which all things aim’.” (Aristotle)⁴¹

3) Soul fulfillment: “The good” is the “full realization of the faculties of the human soul...” (T. H. Green, 1836-82)⁴²

4) Reverence for life: Good means the universal protection of life. (Albert Schweitzer)⁴³

5) Hedonism: The view that good equals pleasure. (Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Bentham)⁴⁴

6) Satisfaction: What is good is that which “fulfills those impulses or strivings of which human nature essentially consists, and in fulfilling them brings satisfaction... *The* good is nothing short of what would fulfill and satisfy wholly.” (Brand Blanshard)⁴⁵ “What is moral is what you feel good after.” (Ernest Hemingway)⁴⁶

7) Desires: A person calls a thing good whenever it is the object of his or her desire. (Hobbes)⁴⁷ “We deem a thing to be good because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it.” (Spinoza)⁴⁸

8) Desire, approval, contentment and worth: “We may speak of the good, generally, as that which satisfies desire. It is that which we approve of, and in which we can rest with a feeling of contentment. Or we may describe it again, if we please, as being the same as worth.” (F. H. Bradley)⁴⁹

9) That which is pleasing to the senses: “That which is not good is not delicious.” (John Milton)⁵⁰

10) Majority likes and dislikes: “What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like and immorality is what they dislike.” (Alfred North Whitehead)⁵¹ “Morality is the custom of one’s country and the current feeling of one’s peers. Cannibalism is moral in a cannibal country.” (Samuel Butler)⁵²

11) Emotivism: “‘This is good’ is synonymous with ‘I approve of this; do so as well.’” (Charles L. Stevenson)⁵³

12) Commending: ‘Good’ is a word used for commending. (R. M. Hare)⁵⁴

13) Wisdom or rationality: “A is a good X if and only if A has the properties (to a higher degree than the average or standard X) which it is rational to want in an X, given what X’s are used for, or expected to do, and the like (whichever rider is appropriate...)” (John Rawls)⁵⁵

14) Survival benefits: “... at the basis of all moral ideas is the people’s conception of the ‘Good’. In whatsoever variety of ways it may be codified, the conception of the ‘Good’ which all peoples have arrived at may be phrased in the following way: The ‘Good’ is that, and that is ‘Good’, which confers survival benefits upon the group.” (Ashley Montagu)⁵⁶

15) Power: “What is good?—Whatever augments the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man.” (Friedrich Nietzsche)⁵⁷

16) Many meanings: “The word *good* has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not *necessarily* a good man.” (G. K. Chesterton)⁵⁸

17) Indefinable: ‘Good’ is a simple indefinable property like yellow, only “non-natural”, i.e., unascertainable by empirical investigation. “If I am asked, ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked, ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.” (G. E. Moore)⁵⁹

This list could easily be expanded, but I think the point is clear enough: there are a great many conflicting ideas about what the word ‘good’ (and other moral terms) mean. As Pascal remarked, “Philosophers count about two hundred and eighty-eight views of the sovereign good.”⁶⁰ Since Pascal’s day, perhaps another 288 have been added.

Some of the theories listed above are ridiculous, some banal, some incoherent, some more sensible than others, and so forth. But as they stand all are incorrect. The first could be knocked down simply by pointing out that there is no God. And as I mentioned in section 1.2, even if there were a God it could not be correct (as even the cleverer theologians like Aquinas realized), since for one thing it would no longer make any sense to even *claim* that God is good.

I will not launch into a refutation here of each of the above theories of the meaning of ‘good’, though through the course of this book some of them will come under critical scrutiny. The point for now is just that we cannot hope to discover what the word ‘good’ means simply by searching through the writings of the “wise men of the ages” since they are hopelessly in disagreement on this issue.

Dictionaries and wise men are of little help; in both cases they offer plenty of *opinions*, but little or no *evidence* to support those opinions. So let us turn next to science. In order to discover

what the word ‘good’ means we must take a side excursion and inquire into the general question: How do you determine what a word means?

2.5 Determining What a Word Means

[This section gets a little technical towards the end. If because of your unfamiliarity with linguistic terminology and techniques you get a bit lost or confused at some point, just skip down to the next section.]

How does everyone learn the meanings of most of the words they know? Well, sometimes, we look up words in a dictionary, but most of the time we do not. In fact, when we are very young and have not yet learned to read, we obviously cannot yet “look up words” in a dictionary at all. So, clearly we learn the meanings of at least our initial stock of words in some other way. And, actually, as we all realize, people learn the meanings of most of the words they know *from the contexts* in which they hear (or see) the words, both the linguistic contexts (the other words around the new word) and the “real-world” (extra-linguistic) contexts. This is also how dictionary makers themselves learn what words mean.⁶¹ So our question comes down to this: *How is it that we can determine what a word means from the various contexts that it occurs in?*

A comment first about the real-world contexts: It may well be that most of us learned the meaning of the word ‘dog’ by first having our parents say something like “Look at the dog!” (or “Doggie!”) in the presence of a dog. However, when you look up the word ‘dog’ (or something less common, say ‘dugong’) in a dictionary the animal will normally not be present. In other words, real-world contexts can virtually always be replaced by linguistic contexts (in this case the dictionary definition) in order to learn the meaning of a new word.⁶² Or, as one linguist puts it, “any aspect of an extra-linguistic context can in principle be mirrored linguistically”.⁶³ For this reason, in discussing the meaning of any word (and moral terms specifically) we will focus mostly on linguistic contexts.

For most linguists, I think, it is now almost a truism that meaning is determined by the context. For example D. A. Cruse, in his book *Lexical Semantics*, states that “It is taken as axiomatic in this book that every aspect of the meaning of a word is reflected in a characteristic pattern normally (and abnormally) in grammatically appropriate contexts.”⁶⁴ I don’t know who was the first to put forward this doctrine of contextual meaning but one of the first proponents seems to have been the early Soviet writer Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov. In his 1929 book, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov states that

The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context. In fact there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage. At the same time, however, the word does not cease to be a single entity; it does not, so to speak, break apart into as many separate words as there are contexts of its usage. The word’s unity is assured, of course, not only by the unity of its phonetic composition but also by the factor of unity which is common to all its meanings. How can the fundamental polysemanticity of the word be reconciled with its unity? To pose this question is to formulate, in a rough and elementary way, the cardinal problem of semantics. It is a problem that can only be solved dialectically.⁶⁵

Of course we have to understand that in saying that “The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context” Voloshinov cannot be claiming that the word itself contributes no meaning to that context. If no individual word brings any meaning to the context, then the entire context becomes the unit of meaning, an unanalyzable morpheme, a meaningless string of symbols (words) which somehow as a whole has meaning, and that meaning is then apportioned out to those individual words in an entirely inexplicable way. If the linguistic context is assumed

to be *only the other words* in the utterance, then each word is somehow supposed to derive its entire meaning from all the others without making any contribution itself—which makes absolutely no sense. Consequently we have to say *both* that the context determines the meaning of the word and that each word also contributes some meaning to the context. As Voloshinov said, we have to look at the situation dialectically.

The meaning of a word is in fact an abstraction from all its various specific meanings in all its various contexts. When such a coherent overall abstraction is impossible, we say the word has two (or more) completely different *senses* or even that there are two or more *different* words which are homonyms, that is, words that sound alike and are perhaps spelled the same but which have *completely* unrelated meanings (such as the noun ‘bear’ and the verb ‘bear’).

We learn the meaning of words from their contexts. But sometimes we get the wrong idea about what a word means; we can be mistaken. And we also get that *wrong* idea from the contexts in which we hear the word. So what is going on here? Often it is a matter of not having heard the word used in a sufficiently broad range of contexts, or in other words, of jumping to a conclusion based on too little contextual evidence.

What usually happens is that when we hear a new word, perhaps once or perhaps a number of times, we seem to almost unconsciously form something of an idea about what that word means. Suppose you never heard the word ‘dugong’ before, but a friend says to you “Guess what I saw at the zoo today—a dugong!” You might very well tentatively jump to the conclusion that a dugong is some sort of exotic animal. In this case you would be right. But the evidence is still fairly weak; perhaps a dugong was instead some new Chinese automobile your friend saw in the zoo parking lot. If your friend had gone on to say, “These dugongs look well-built and get great gas mileage!” you might well have abandoned the “exotic animal” notion, and—on the basis of the additional contextual evidence—jumped to the new idea that a “dugong” is a car.

However, in some other cases, the problem of coming to understand the meaning of a word is quite different. It is not due to any lack of familiarity with the word, or any shortage of contexts in which you’ve heard the word used and even used it frequently yourself, but rather the difficulty of deriving a correct definition *out of* all that extensive contextual evidence. This problem especially arises for words expressing very abstract or abstruse concepts of the sort that often give rise to philosophical confusion or disputes. Words like ‘true’, ‘beautiful’, ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘spirit’, ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’, ‘good’, and so forth.

In these cases, it is often difficult for someone to initially even come up with any guess as to how the word in question should be *defined* (even if they do know very well how to *use* it). But over time, some few people at least give the matter various amounts of thought, and come up with different ideas about what the word supposedly means. Some of the rest of us then latch onto one or another of these conflicting ideas, usually without giving it a whole lot of thought ourselves. But what we should really say here is that we now have a bunch of diverse *hypotheses* about what the word in question actually means.

What is needed to scientifically determine what such a problematic word means is mostly a *systematic method of testing different hypotheses*. And lo, and behold, there is such a method! It is actually very close to the method we more or less unconsciously and less systematically use with less problematic words, namely, to test each hypothesis against the many contexts where the word is properly used as well as against those contexts where its use would be linguistically deviant (i.e., something that sounds weird).

This basic idea has been considerably refined, however, and one of those who made a contribution in this area was the philosopher/linguist, Paul Ziff. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, after first mentioning the limited value of pictorial dictionaries and the importance in a dictionary of an abundance of good example contexts for a word, goes on to say this about Ziff's theory and method:

These intuitions are behind the U.S. philosopher Paul Ziff's semantic theory. According to Ziff, the meaning of a word is a function, first, of its complementary set, which consists of all the acceptable sentences in which the word can occur, and, second, of its contrastive set, which consists of all the words that can replace that word in all of these sentences without rendering the sentences deviant. Clearly, the elaboration of the contrastive set will produce words more and more similar in meaning to the word in question, the limiting case being synonyms that can occur wherever the word in question can occur.⁶⁶

In further defense of taking the "contrastive set" into consideration, Ziff himself wrote that "the significance of what is said depends on what is not said" but which *could* have been said in that context.⁶⁷

One of the basic things that linguists do in studying a language is to make a morphemic analysis. A morpheme was originally defined as one of the minimum meaningful elements in a language, consisting of a string of phonemes (the discrete sounds used in the language) which go to make up words or parts of words. These days many linguists prefer to define 'morpheme' as "the minimal syntactic unit"⁶⁸ or as one of the set of primary elements resulting from a special kind of distributional analysis of phoneme clusters in the language (since that is how morphemes are identified). But either way, it is true that morphemes do correspond closely with the basic units of meaning in a language.

This is a remarkable fact, and one of the strongest arguments which Ziff adduces in support of his approach to semantics. *Why* should a morphological analysis of English, for example, which does *not* employ any appeals to questions of *meaning*, nevertheless manage to pick out just those basic *units of meaning* in English? Such a result proves that there is *some connection* between the techniques employed in a morphological analysis and meaning. Those techniques are based almost exclusively on distribution and contrast, and specifically on the consideration of partial contrasts between pairs of utterances as the context (linguistic or otherwise) varies.⁶⁹ Such a remarkable result, says Ziff

is not an accident; neither is it a miracle. Any theory of meaning that fails to account for and explain the fact is *ipso facto* an inadequate and unilluminating theory.⁷⁰

Thus the meaning of a word is in some sense a function of the distribution of the word in the corpus of the language (i.e., in the set of possible, non-deviant utterances in the language). Or, in Ziff's more precise terms, meaning is a function of features of the distributive set (or complementary set), and the contrastive set for the word in question. Consequently to determine the meaning of a word, "the first step is to determine as precisely as possible the membership of its distributive and contrastive sets".⁷¹ That is, one must determine as best as one can all the contexts in which the word could be used, and all the alternative words that could be used in place of the word in those contexts. That is obviously a huge task! However, in practice it is not actually necessary to try to list "all" such contexts (which are, after all, virtually infinite in number), nor to itemize every single item in the contrastive set for each of these virtually infinite number of contexts. What is necessary is to gather as wide a *range* of such contexts as you can, so that (for example) you include contexts for all the "senses" of the word you can find in the important large dictionaries, and hopefully quite a few beyond that. It is not so much the *number*

of example contexts and contrastive words in those contexts which is important, as the *diversity* of those contexts and contrasts.

However, determining as best you can the diverse contexts in which the word is used, and the contrastive set of words which could also be used in those various contexts, is by itself not enough. Ziff notes that it is possible to determine the membership of these distributive and contrastive sets with great precision and detail and still have no idea what the meaning of the word in question is. This is in fact the explanation for why dictionaries tend to be better at giving a large variety of sample contexts and the definitions (meanings) appropriate to those contexts, than they are at give root or overall definitions for words.

There are additional steps which can be taken at this stage, however. One fairly obvious one is to figure out the part of speech of the word in question (if that was not already obvious) and to examine its grammar and precise syntax. The *Britannica* article goes on to say, for example, that

the grammatical restrictions on a word represent, as it were, the ‘skeleton’ of its meaning before the ‘flesh’ is put on by the co-occurrences [contextual evidence]. The very first step in giving the meaning of a word is to specify its grammatical category—noun, verb, adjective, adverb, connective, and so forth.... A refined grammar yields much more: the fact that the adjective ‘good,’ for example, unlike adjectives like ‘yellow’ or ‘fat,’ can occur in the frames ‘(He is) good at (playing chess)’; ‘(The root is) good to (eat)’; ‘It is good that (it is raining)’; ‘It was good of (him) to (come)’ says a great deal about the meaning of that word. The co-occurrences then complete the picture.⁷²

However, the most basic thing to do at this point is to start gathering *hypotheses* as to what the meaning of the word in question might be, and to test each of these hypotheses against the range of sample contexts of the word, and in light of the contrastive set of words which could have been used instead in those contexts. This is the way that any hypothesis about the specific meaning of some particular word is *tested against the evidence* in lexical semantics.

I should note that while there is no doubt that Ziff’s general approach to lexical semantics is correct, we need not necessarily accept his entire theory as he outlined it in his 1960 book. Indeed, Ziff by no means claimed to have presented a complete and polished theory, and various criticisms of some of the details have been made of it. There may also be better ways of formulating this sort of semantic theory. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, notes that “the essence of Ziff’s insight can be reinterpreted in terms of the notions developed by [the linguist] Zellig S. Harris: co-occurrence (instead of complementary set) and co-occurrence difference (instead of contrastive set)...”⁷³ It is not Ziff’s precise theoretical arguments, terminology, or exact overall theory that we are concerned with, but only the basic approach that he developed *and* the example exposition he gave of that approach with the very word that we are now concerned with, the word ‘good’.

2.6 Defining ‘Good’ in Terms of “Interests”

If you look to see how the word ‘good’ is actually used you will find that it has a great variety of uses. The most common everyday uses of the word ‘good’ are in connection with everyday objects, activities, desires, needs and interests. “These are good apples!” “He has a good job.” These are not moral evaluations (at least in their standard contexts). The word ‘good’ is also used in aesthetics, in evaluating artists and works of art. “That is not a very good painting despite the artist’s reputation.” And again, despite certain similarities, aesthetics is not ethics, and aesthetic

evaluations are not moral evaluations (though we may wish to evaluate a work of art or an artist from *both* aesthetic and ethical points of view). And of course we use the word ‘good’ in ethics, in moral evaluations of people, groups of people, human institutions (e.g., governments), and their actions. “A good deed.” “A good person.”

A good knife is normally considered to be one that is sharp, holds its edge well, doesn’t rust or corrode, doesn’t easily break, and so forth. A good apple is one that is not spoiled or damaged, not infected by insects, looks appealing, tastes good, and so forth. A good car is one that is reliable, comfortable, good looking, drives well, gets good mileage, handles well, and so forth. A good view is one that allows you to see quite a lot and in an unobstructed manner, and so forth. Here are a few more examples of the diverse meanings that ‘good’ seems to have:

- | | |
|--|--|
| a) Have a good time! | (‘Good’ meaning something like “enjoyable”.) |
| b) That meat is no good. | (“fresh”, or the opposite of “spoiled”.) |
| c) This is a good apple. | (“delicious”) |
| d) A good laugh. | (“hearty”) |
| e) Be good! | (“Behave yourself!”) |
| f) A good example of a red giant star. | (“typical”) |
| g) A good inch long. | (“full”) |
| h) A good wine with fish. | (“appropriate”) |

It seems, almost, as if every occurrence of the word ‘good’ must have a very “different meaning”, or at least that there is no overall, or central meaning to the word that all uses share. This, at least, is the way that many people have interpreted the situation.⁷⁴ In reality, they have not looked very hard for a much more *abstract* meaning that covers most or all of these cases.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most famous and influential bourgeois philosophers of the 20th century, put forward the “family resemblance” theory of meaning. He asserted, for example, that the word ‘good’ “must have a family of meanings”—that is, numerous different meanings depending on its different uses, any two of which may have some similarity or common semantic elements, but having no common semantic elements through *all* its different uses.⁷⁵ This theory has been accepted by many and has generated an enormous amount of discussion. The prime motivation behind this theory is once again the commonplace observation that words seem to have somewhat different meanings in different contexts.

But something that is often overlooked about the family resemblance theory is that it is subject to empirical test. Wittgenstein himself, in the worst tradition of armchair philosophy, evidently never thought of making such an empirical test of the theory. Instead he says that thinking about the many diverse uses of words such as ‘good’ will enable you “to see” that they “must” have a family of meanings. But what is wanted here is not a conjecture or assertion about what an investigation “must” disclose, but the actual investigation itself. When Paul Ziff made such an investigation (see below) he found that there were common elements of meaning throughout virtually all the occurrences of the word ‘good’ after all!

Perhaps, in passing, we should also briefly say something about another dogma from Wittgenstein, that *meaning is use*: “For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁷⁶ While this is perhaps sniffing down the right trail, it is far from correct as it stands. For one thing, as Ziff points out, words can be *misused*. If a word’s meaning *is* its use, how are we then to identify its misuse?⁷⁷ Similarly, Ziff points out that the actual use of any word depends on additional factors besides its meaning.⁷⁸ Wittgenstein would have been much closer to the

mark if he had focused on how the precise meaning of a word derives from its *context*, rather from its *use*.

Returning to the main theme, we can at least say that no theory to the effect that words like ‘good’ *do not have* an overall or core meaning have been proven. What then, if anything, is the common root meaning of the word ‘good’ in virtually all its uses, whether in everyday affairs, morals, aesthetics, or otherwise?

An actual investigation of the sort required—careful, thorough and convincing—has in fact been carried out by Ziff in the last chapter of his book *Semantic Analysis* (1960).⁷⁹ He showed that except for a small number of highly idiomatic, derivative uses (such as “It’s a good deal further than I thought.”) the word ‘good’ does have a single, common root meaning. **In its standard use in practical affairs, in aesthetics and in moral discourse, the word ‘good’ means “answering to certain interests”.**

It is by following the analytical procedure outlined above that the root definition of ‘good’ as “answering to certain interests” has been determined. You may check the 71 diverse definitions given in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* to see that this root meaning does in fact occur in most of them. The first definition given for the adjective, 1a(1), for instance: “having a favorable or auspicious character” is obviously compatible with the hypothesis since if something has a favorable or auspicious character it does indeed answer to certain interests in the thing’s character. A few of the definitions given do not accord well with the hypothesis, such as 1d(3), “FULL—used as a qualifier to indicated a quantity not less than and generally greater than the stated figure” as in “a good inch long” It is these cases however which are declared to be highly idiomatic, derivative, or non-standard uses. In these cases it is not too difficult to see how the derivation may have arisen; in this particular case a complete or full thing generally answers to our interests better than a partial, incomplete, short, ... thing. (A board that is too long can be sawed down; a board that is too short is ... “no good”.)

It is interesting to note that one of the 71 definitions given by this dictionary is pretty much the same as what has been determined to be the root meaning of the word in its standard uses: 1a(4), “favorably affecting one’s interests...”. No special prominence is given to this definition, however, and actually it is construed very narrowly as in usages like “wished him good luck”.

Perhaps the most instructive aspect of the whole page in this dictionary devoted to the word ‘good’ is the etymological note that in its origin the English word ‘good’ is akin to that of words in Old Frisian, Old High German and Sanskrit which mean “uniting” or “fitting” or “to fit together”. It is easy to see how “fitting” something is which answers to our interests. Indeed, it would not be such a bad gloss to say that what is good is that which *fits* our purposes.

There are a number of other definitions of the word ‘good’ that have a certain plausibility, that is, which seem to satisfactorily cover a large number of occurrences of the word ‘good’ in different contexts. Some examples are:

“meeting certain needs”

“meeting one’s needs”

“fulfilling one’s needs”

“satisfying one’s desires”

“fitting one’s purposes”

“answering to certain purposes”

All of these kinds of definitions of the word ‘good’ are on the right track; and as we saw above in Section 12, there have been thinkers down through the ages who have put forward one or another of these definitions. I think perhaps I owe them an apology for being so facetious in lumping them together with such “wise men” as religious prophets, Ernest Hemingway, and G. K. Chesterton! The only thing wrong with such alternative definitions of the word ‘good’ is that they are not quite as good as “answering to certain interests”, i.e., they do not cover quite as many occurrences of the word in as wide a range of contexts. But at least they are not completely off the wall like some of the traditional definitions!

At the end of Ziff’s book, after successfully testing his hypothesis that ‘good’ means “answering to certain interests” against uses of the word in 157 diverse and representative utterances, he provides 3 additional highly idiomatic utterances in which his hypothesis might be disputed:

(158) It is a good two miles off.

(159) He played a good hour on the cello.

(160) He’s looking pretty good in there today.

One has to strain a bit, I would not deny it, to make the analysis fit. But that doesn’t matter. That the analysis will not easily fit this or that case, what does that prove? For it does fit the other cases cited and so one can always construe the cases that don’t fit as special cases. Only one thing will upset the analysis presented here: a better one.

There are variations on the theme, but this is what ‘good’ means: answering to certain interests.⁸⁰

2.7 The Word ‘Good’ in Morals

At this point we have determined that the central or root meaning of the word ‘good’ is “answering to certain interests”. But this abstract formulation covers (virtually) all its uses in everyday affairs and art appreciation as well as in moral discourse. If we restrict our view to just morals alone is there anything more we can say about what the word ‘good’ means? Yes, there is!

Once we take the word ‘good’ to mean “answering to certain interests”, we immediately confront the questions “What interests?” and “Whose interests?”. On this Ziff remarks:

On the hypothesis under consideration, ‘good’ has associated with it the condition of answering to certain interests, which interests are in question being indicated either by the element modifying or the element modified by ‘good’ or by certain features of the context of utterance. The interests in question are the interests one has. The answer to the question ‘Whose interests?’ is this: whichever one has the interests in question. Thus the question is essentially irrelevant. The relevant question is whether what is in question does or does not answer to the indicated interests.⁸¹

Consider the sentence “That’s a good apple.” You and I could have a genuine disagreement about whether or not a particular apple is good depending upon our various interests. I might be interested in just eating an apple; you might be interested in making an apple pie (a good pie apple is not necessarily a good eating apple), or painting a still life (in which case all you would be interested in is the apple’s appearance, not its taste), etc. It may seem that this is a matter of *my* interests versus *your* interests. But Ziff’s point is that *in determining whether or not the apple is good* it is really not a matter of *whose* interests, but of *which* interests are in question. In this case the diverse interests might be:

- One’s interest in eating an apple.
- One’s interest in making an apple pie.
- One’s interest in painting a picture of an apple.

It is easy to see that Ziff is correct here, for at one time or other *either you or I* might have any of these interests in an apple. It is not *which* of us that has the particular interest which is important, but *which of the various possible interests* which is important in determining whether or not the apple is “good”.

But suppose that you are a painter who specializes in still lifes, and furthermore that you do not eat apples because of your dentures or some peculiar allergy. Suppose that I am not a painter, and not a cook, and that my only ordinary interest in apples is in eating them. Then when we dispute about whether or not this is a good apple, there may be a point in distinguishing *whose* interests are in question. The reason is obvious; in this contrived case, *which interests* is a function of *whose interests*. Thus if we specify *whose* interests are at issue, we are indirectly specifying *which* interests are at issue.

In morals we find this same situation, but it is no longer a matter of contrived differences in the interests of individuals. Different groups of people, and specifically *different social classes*, do in fact have different sets of interests, especially economic or “material” interests. The capitalist has an interest in paying his workers less, and getting more work out of them. The workers have an interest in getting better pay, and limiting (and ultimately ending) this exploitation. These interests are at odds, and therefore many things which the capitalist will call “good”, the workers will call “bad”, and vice versa. Clearly, for example, a pay cut for the workers will be seen as good by the boss (if he can get away with it) and bad by the workers.

Of course it is true that the real difference which leads the capitalist and “his” workers to disagree about whether the pay cut is good or bad is their differing economic interests. But because these interests are generally opposed, and opposed in regular, predictable ways, for the two classes in question, it is natural and appropriate to identify these opposed interests with the classes that have them. For the same reason, we are correct in saying that these two classes have moralities which are in major respects opposed.

But in mentioning class moralities here I am jumping ahead in the argument. After all, there were moralities before classes came into being, and there will be morality after classes cease to exist. We must take this one step at a time. Before discussing the modifications which must be made to our definition of ‘good’ in morals *in class society* we must first consider the case in non-class society. So, for now, the point of raising this has just been to demonstrate that in the sphere of morality we must be concerned *both* with *which* interests are at issue and also with *whose* interests are at issue, and often it is enough just to specify *whose* interests.

Recall, now, all the more specific meanings that the word ‘good’ has in very specific contexts, as we discussed in the last section. ‘Good’ means “answering to certain interests”, but in a specific context just *whose* interests are at issue, and just *which* interests are at issue, become clear. Consequently, in those specific contexts, to say something is “good” gives us a lot more information. In a standard context, for example, saying “That’s a good knife.” tells us not just abstractly that the knife in question “answers to certain interests”, but that it is sharp, keeps its edge well, won’t rust, and so forth, *because those are our usual interests in knives*. (Of course we might also say, “That’s a good knife, but it needs sharpening.” In that case we are admitting that the knife in question does not meet, in one important way, our normal interests in knives, but also affirming that this can be corrected by sharpening it.)

In general, the more we restrict the context, the more the matter of just *whose* and just *which* interests are at issue also become more definite. When we restrict our attention to just morality and moral discourse, we have restricted both these conditions in very important ways, which we must now start to bring out and make explicit.

In general, as we have been saying, ‘good’ means “answering to certain interests”. In general it is “one’s” interests which are relevant; the “one” (or group) whose interests are at issue as determined by the context of the utterance. But in morals the interests in question are nearly always (or at least are nearly always *represented to be*) those of the people considered as a whole. (Even where this is actually impossible, as is usually the case in class society, the moral terminology still *pretends* that it is so. More on this later.)

Thus in *morals* the word ‘good’ means “answering to the interests of the people as a whole”. Which of their interests? That is narrowed down, too. It is their common, collective interests which are at least *mostly* at issue. So here is our full, more concrete definition: **In morality, or moral discussion, ‘good’ means (for the most part) “answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.”**

How do we know this? It is simply a matter of looking at numerous typical cases of moral terminology in use. We must remember that morality is a matter of inter-human relationships. My interest in having toast for breakfast instead of cereal is hardly a moral issue (except for contrived situations). For the most part, and as an initial approximation, only actions which affect others fall into the province of morality, and not even all of them. If my choice of toast negatively impacts the shareholders of General Mills Corporation (in some tiny way!) because less cereal is sold, it can be said to affect other people. But eating toast for breakfast is still not immoral. Only actions which affect the common, collective interests of the people as a whole are relevant in morals; this is what a general examination of clearly moral or clearly immoral actions shows. (This will be discussed further later.)

It should be noted, of course, that often what affects us as an individual can nevertheless reflect a common, collective interest. If Tom shoots Dick, that obviously negatively affects Dick’s individual interests. But if you think about it for a moment you can see that it also affects *everyone’s* common interest in not being shot.

Moral terminology thus *presupposes* that the people as a whole *have* common, collective interests. As we shall see, this is true in only a very limited sense in class society. This makes moral language *inherently deceptive* in class society. (And this, in turn, often explains why it is being used in the first place!)

It is not surprising that ‘good’ has a somewhat modified, i.e., less abstract, definition in morals than it does in general. After all, the general definition of ‘good’ was arrived at by abstracting its core meaning from all its possible socio-linguistic contexts. If the range of contexts is limited to a specific type, then of course the abstraction of the common elements of meaning in that limited range of discourse can be expected to include elements which would otherwise have to have been abstracted out. The narrower the range of contexts considered, the less abstract the common elements of meaning need to be.

The definition of ‘good’ in morals is less abstract than its definition in general because we can now say something more definite about *which* and *whose* interests are at issue.

2.8 Other Terms in Moral Discourse

We said earlier that any moral term (any word used specifically in moral discourse, such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘duty’, etc.) can be roughly defined in terms of any other moral term. Since we have now determined what the word ‘good’ means in morals we could simply proceed to define all the rest in terms of ‘good’.

However, we have determined that ‘good’ means (in morals) “answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.” So it is not only “just as easy” (in fact easier) to define other moral words *in terms of this definition of ‘good’*, namely in terms of the people’s interests, than it is to define them in terms of ‘good’ itself. This will also allow us more flexibility and precision; that is, our definitions of the other moral terms will not be as rough as they would necessarily have to be if we used ‘good’ as our starting point.

Referring back to section 2.2, where John Austin’s “dimension-word” concept was introduced, all moral words, that is *in morals* all words in ‘good’s dimension, are definable in terms of “answering to the common, collective interests of the people”. Austin said that the dimension-word was the keyword in a group of words all with the same “function”. While it is not clear to me that this concept of a group of words having the same “function” is always helpful, in this particular case I think it is. Moreover, it seems pretty clear that the *function* of not only ‘good’, but of all words in its moral dimension, is to allow discussion on the subject of “answering to people’s interests”, but to do so *without explicitly referring to those interests*. Why would people want to do that? We’ll get into this more later on, but the brief answer is that this is extremely useful when those who are really concerned only about their own individual or group interests desire to put social pressure on others to act in a way that goes against *those other people’s* own individual or group interests!

It might be objected that really we should use the same contextual method of defining each additional moral term as Ziff used in determining what ‘good’ means, instead of trying to define other moral terms in variations of the same words that happen to best define ‘good’. This objection misunderstands what I am proposing to do here.

Of course the meaning of all words (other than technical terms defined by fiat) should be determined by the same sort of contextual procedure as was used to discover the meaning of the word ‘good’. The present effort is in relation to the question of how one goes about formulating hypotheses for what a word means, which one should then proceed to test against example utterances of the word. You see, the major difficulty in attempting to apply Ziff’s method is that it does not provide us with much of a guideline for formulating such hypotheses.

Ziff suggests using paradigms where appropriate, such as in defining the meaning of ‘tiger’ or ‘lion’. But with more abstract words, such as ‘good’ another technique is required:

The second procedure, and one that I shall employ in connection with the word ‘good’, is essentially indirect in character. It is the most powerful method of analysis that I know of. One proceeds first by considering and examining deviant uses of the words in question. Secondly, one must formulate some sort of hypothesis to account for the fact that the utterances in question are or seem to be deviant. Thirdly, one determines whether or not it is possible to generate deviant utterances on the basis of the hypothesis. Thus if I were concerned to define the word ‘ought’, the first step would be to formulate some hypothesis that would serve to account for the fact that ‘I ought to do it if I were you.’ is somewhat odd.⁸²

While this is an important and useful suggestion, it’s only a partial solution. Formulating the hypothesis that ‘good’ means “answering to certain interests” from this initial suggestion might well take a lot of work, and considerable imagination. It would be nice if we had some more suggestions or clues.

One such suggestion is that you might consider the definitions in existing dictionaries as possible hypotheses for the core meaning of the word. This is at least something to try if you can’t *think* of any hypotheses yourself. If you tried this with the word ‘good’, using *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, you would have 71 candidate hypotheses. That’s quite a few to sort through, but in fact one of them is actually very close to the mark (“favorably affecting one’s interests...”).

An even better suggestion is to make use of any known meanings of other words which are related to the one you are investigating. This is the primary plan I am attempting to follow here.

If I were starting from scratch in attempting to define an abstract word, there might be nothing much else to do but follow Ziff’s suggestion, to concentrate first on deviant uses of the word, and perhaps browse through existing dictionaries looking for a clue. But if you know that a group of words are related in meaning, and if you have already determined the meaning of one, then you already have a tremendous head start in determining the meaning of the others. You have some ready-made clues to help you in formulating a hypothesis, namely, the words or concepts in the definition you already have, together with words whose meaning is close to them.

This is our present situation. We know that ‘good’ means (in morals) “answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole”. And we know that words such as ‘right’, ‘just’, ‘moral’, etc. are closely related to ‘good’ (in that rough definitions of each of these words can be given in terms of any of the others). Therefore we have every reason to believe that we might be able to form hypotheses about the meaning of these other related words in much the same language.

Thus I am using the meta-hypothesis that *all* moral terms can be defined, and can only be satisfactorily defined, in terms similar to “answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole”.

But similar is not the same as identical. There is work not only to be done to come up with these various hypotheses for the meaning of other moral terms, but much more work to be done in actually carefully and systematically checking out these hypotheses by comparing them to the evidence of the distributive and contrastive sets of contextual data. And I readily admit that what I have mostly done here is just to generate the hypotheses, not to prove them correct via careful

reviews of the evidence. My investigations here are by no means as thorough, nor my conclusions by any means as certain, as Ziff's corresponding work on the word 'good'. My justification for this lack of diligence is simply the feeling that for my purposes providing the precise definitions of these other terms is not essential. If I have gotten some of these definitions slightly wrong it should not affect the conclusions in the rest of the book.

'BAD' (Adj.) – In most cases when the word 'bad' is used, if the word 'good' were used in its place the utterance would mean the opposite of what it does.⁸³ However, there are various kinds of opposites. "Short" is the opposite of "tall", and so is "not tall". But since some people are neither short nor tall it cannot follow that 'short' means the same as 'not tall'. Similarly some actions or behavior are neither good nor bad, right nor wrong, such as (in most situations) drinking a glass of water. Drinking a glass of water is not a (morally) bad thing to do, but neither is it a (morally) "good thing" to do.

My suggested hypothesis for the meaning of the word 'bad' (in morals) which I believe gets around this difficulty is "failing to answer to the sought-for common, collective interests of the people". If in the case of some innocuous action, such as drinking a glass of water (in ordinary circumstances), there *are no* such **sought-for** common, collective interests at issue, then the action is not morally bad.

'RIGHT' (Adj.) – First note that 'right' and 'wrong', as moral adjectives, seem to refer just to *actions* or *activities*.⁸⁴ Whereas we can characterize a man, from a moral point of view, by saying "He's a good man." we cannot properly say "He's a right man."⁸⁵ And presumably this is because the adjective 'right' (in moral discourse) is reserved for characterizing actions and not those who engage in those actions (or their traits, motives, or intentions).

One other important thing to note about 'right' and 'wrong' is that the use of the comparative and superlative forms of each adjective seems to be quite strained. Most single syllable adjectives generate their comparative and superlative forms by adding *-er* and *-est* to the root. 'Righter', 'rightest', 'wronger', and 'wrongest' all sound somewhat peculiar, though they are occasionally used. The other common method of forming the comparative and superlative forms is to use 'more' or 'most' together with the root word. This is generally done with multisyllabic words (e.g., 'more beautiful' rather than 'beautifuler'). But these forms of the comparatives and superlatives of 'right' and 'wrong' are also not very common.

It is true that we sometimes say of two people in a dispute "Well, they're both right, but Ed is *more* right than Bill is." I find it significant, however, that in cases like this, there is special emphasis given to 'more', indicating that something out of the ordinary is going on.

The comparative and superlative forms of 'good' (i.e., 'better' and 'best') are of course very widely used. My theory to account for this difference between 'right' and 'good' is that with 'right' there is less of a question of *degree* at issue. It is more of a question of either meeting some moral standard or not meeting it.⁸⁶

In moral contexts, my hypothesis is that the adjective 'right' is normally used to characterize actions, and means "conforming to the standards we have for answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole for that sort of activity."⁸⁷

Note that this close similarity in meaning between 'good' and 'right' in morals explains why the two words can often (but not always) be substituted for each other (even though this does usually change the meaning slightly. Thus we can say with equal validity:

- 1) “It is good to support the masses in their struggles against oppression.”
- 2) “It is right to support the masses in their struggles against oppression.”

But statement 2) is a bit stronger here, since in addition to saying what 1) says, it also says that this means meeting the *standards* for moral conduct that we uphold in these circumstances.

‘WRONG’ (Adj.) – My corresponding hypothesis for the core meaning of ‘wrong’ in morals is then “failing to meet the expected standards (assuming such to be relevant) for answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole for that sort of activity.”

‘JUST’ (Adj.) – The adjective ‘just’ in morals has a meaning very close to that of ‘right’, including the element of “meeting a moral standard”. The biggest difference that I have found so far is that ‘just’, as compared with ‘right’, can more readily refer to people, collective agents, human traits, intentions, motives, and the like, which ‘right’ usually cannot.⁸⁸ Thus we can say “Her motives are just.” though it would be odd to say “Her motives are right.” (We would normally say instead that her motives are *good*.)

In moral contexts, my hypothesis is that the adjective ‘just’ means “conforming to the standards we have for answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.”

Consider the following three statements:

- 1) “Her (moral) decisions are good.”
- 2) “Her (moral) decisions are just.”
- 3) “Her (moral) decisions are right.”

On my theory, all three are very close in meaning, but there are some subtle differences. Statement 1) means “Her decisions answer to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.” 2) means “Her decisions meet the standards which answer to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.” And 3) means “Her decisions meet the standards which answer to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole in decision making.” Of the three, therefore, the strongest seems to be 2), which not only means that her decisions answer to the interests of the people, and that they go beyond that by meeting the set of standards we have for answering to the interests of the people, but—beyond that—there is not as much of an implication that we are concerned merely with the one specific sort of action being discussed here, namely her decision making. On the other hand, talk about what is “just” also carries a connotation of what is *legal*, and of course what is legal is not necessarily what is moral (especially in bourgeois society)! Furthermore, ‘just’ carries a connotation of *fairness*, which also relates in part to legal contexts. These are the kinds of connotations and subtleties that abound in moralistic language.

‘JUSTICE’ (Noun) – Even more so than the moral adjective ‘just’, and even within moral discourse, the word ‘justice’ has legal connotations. The local courts in San Francisco, as well as the police, are headquartered in what is officially known as the “Hall of Justice”—though many of us (and not just revolutionaries) prefer to refer to it as the “Hall of Injustice”, since injustice is at least as common there as justice! The 1960s radical H. Rap Brown (later known as Jamil Abdullah al-Amin) once said that because of the rampant racism in America “Justice means ‘just us white folks’.” So for many of us, the term ‘justice’ when used in this society frequently has a bitter irony to it. But leaving aside the connotations that the word has acquired in bourgeois

society, and because of its association with the very unjust capitalist legal system, what is the core meaning of the word ‘justice’ in morals?

Because of the association of the word ‘justice’ with legal matters, dictionaries often give as one definition of the word “the quality of conforming to law”. But if we are concerned not with law but with morals, and in light of the definition of ‘good’ which we arrived at in morals, the hypothesis which I shall put forward is that ‘justice’ means “the quality of conforming to the standards which answer to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole”. In other words, we are simply transforming the adjective ‘just’ into a noun.

‘MORAL’ (Adj.) – The word ‘moral’ is often a slightly more formal near synonym for either ‘good’ or ‘right’, depending on the context (though sometimes the syntax needs to be slightly changed). Thus “He’s a moral person.” means something very nearly the same as “He’s a good person.”

However, the core meaning of ‘moral’ seems to be somewhat more general and abstract than for the words ‘good’ or ‘right’. My hypothesis is that ‘moral’ means “concerned with, or pertaining to, questions of right or wrong and the standards which govern this”. This covers statements such as “Moral discourse annoyed Marx.” But it also covers the statement “He’s a moral person.” since someone who is “concerned with right and wrong” is also generally presumed to *act* rightly.

‘MORALITY’ (Noun) – Codes or doctrines concerning what is moral conduct. Thus, in the positive sense, “codes or doctrines concerning which conduct or behavior answers to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole.”

‘MORAL OBLIGATION’ (Noun phrase) – The last three moral terms we will briefly consider here are a departure from those previously discussed in that they incorporate the concept of *obligation* into the meanings. To be obligated is to be “bound”, or “constrained”, or “required”, or “forced”, either legally or morally (or possibly in some other regard⁸⁹), to act in a certain way.

In the case of legal obligation we are bound, or constrained, or required to obey the law because of the penalties that will ensue if we do not (such as fines or jail). But in what way is anyone *bound*, or *constrained*, or *required* to be moral?! There seems to be something funny going on here! This “moral obligation” has seemed to many to be some sort of cosmic compulsion, some demand or threat from God, or something that seems almost mystical! But what will really happen if we flout our moral “obligations”? The universe and God will have nothing to say; we will then just be immoral.

Aren’t there *any* real penalties when we ignore our “moral obligations”? Well, actually there are, and they are of two different kinds. (We are ignoring the legal penalties for flouting moral obligations which are *also* legal obligations.) First, there is the penalty that will likely ensue because of the different (and more negative) way that other people will relate toward you, assuming they learn of your immoral behavior. This comes about because most people are basically moral, and really hold it against those who flout what they consider to be appropriate moral norms. And, second, there is the penalty that will likely ensue from your own *conscience*. If you flout what you yourself believe to be a moral obligation, and—if you are a normal person with a normal conscience (not everyone is!)—then you will also suffer an internal penalty for your immoral act. In some cases, this can be a genuine torment and agony. (We’ll be talking a lot more about the conscience in chapter 3.)

So, despite the claims of the religious and the Kantians, moral obligation is by no means a cosmic imperative. It is simply a matter of there being negative consequences, both socially and personally, when we act against what we (and the society around us) believe to be moral. I am not trying to dismiss the concept of moral obligation, but rather merely to demystify it (something that sorely needs to be done!).

‘Moral obligation’ then means “the constraints on us to act in a way which answers to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole, constraints which are imposed on us both by the attitudes of society (other people) and by our own consciences.”

‘DUTY’ (Noun) – In moral discourse ‘duty’ is simply the common word for moral obligation.⁹⁰ However, ‘duty’ carries connotations that the more formal term ‘moral obligation’ does not, because of other actual or imagined “duties” we have, such as family duties, religious duties, or patriotic duties, where an extreme sense of shame is conditioned to arise in most people who fail to properly perform such duties.

‘OUGHT’ (Verbal aux.) – The word ‘ought’ is a “verbal auxiliary”, which is used to add the element of *obligation* to the meaning of the verbal phrase (and hence the utterance as a whole).⁹¹ In moral discourse, it is the additional meaning of *moral obligation* which is added. Thus, in morals, ‘ought’ means “was (were) or am (is, are) under moral obligation (to do, be, have ... something).”

There are many other words which have, in some contexts, a moral import, such as ‘should’, ‘must’, ‘ethical’ (often used as meaning the same as ‘moral’), and so forth. There is no particular need to try to present an exhaustive list here.

Finally, I must not fail to mention that the meaning of *all* moral terms, including ‘good’ and those mentioned in this section, need to be further modified in a systematic way in class society, as we shall be discussing later.

2.9 The Word ‘Interest’

The most fundamental of all concepts in social philosophy is that of *interests*. In political philosophy the concept of interests stands behind, and explicates, its basic categories, such as that of social classes and ideology. The concept of interests enters aesthetics not only because of social (class) considerations, but also because of “purely aesthetic” considerations.⁹² But it is in ethics that the situation is most pronounced: one cannot really understand ethics *at all* except in terms of interests. For ethics, ‘interest’ is the key word, the key concept; it is *the key*.

A. Which Sense of the Word ‘Interest’ Are We Interested In? We have determined (following Ziff) that the word ‘good’ means (in general) “answering to certain interests”, and that it means in morals “answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole”. It is therefore apparent that the word ‘interest’ is a crucial one for ethics. But what exactly does *it* mean?

On this point Ziff himself says:

Something must be said about my use of the word ‘interest’. I mean to be using that word in an ordinary way. I shall assume that you know what that is, that you are familiar with the word.

Since the word has been used in extraordinary ways by philosophers it is, I suppose, necessary for me to disassociate myself from that tradition.

I take it that interests, motives, wants, wishes, hopes, cravings, longings, likings, hankerings, and so on are all different, cannot be identified.⁹³

Ziff goes on to say that he is not using the word 'interest' in some special way, as for example, the element of meaning common to all these other words ('motives', 'wants', etc.). He rejects the idea that 'good' might be better defined in terms of "ends" or "goals", or in terms of "wants", "needs" or "desires", any one of which might be taken to mean "more or less" the same thing as 'interests'. By 'interest' he means 'interest', he says, not something else. And he evidently does not believe it is necessary to define the word 'interest' beyond this.

It is of course true that one cannot be expected to go on defining one's terms indefinitely. Sooner or later you have to assume that people understand your definitions and do not require that the words in those definitions be defined themselves. Providing a correct definition of 'good' in terms of 'interest' is a tremendous advance. Unlike definitions of 'good' in terms of "rights" or "duties" or "justice", we have escaped from the realm of what is normally considered moral terminology. (We will return to this issue.) This is important because it allows us to understand moral terminology in terms which are less subject to endless and irresolvable passions and disputes. It puts the discussion on a more objective and scientific plane, less prone to interference by confused and mistaken theories.

Nevertheless the word 'interest' is not without some difficulties of its own due to the fact that there is more than one *ordinary* sense of the word 'interest'. If we are really to adequately define 'good' we must say a few words in explication of 'interest' as well.

'Interest' comes from the Latin word '*interesse*' which meant "to concern" or "to be of importance". But its more immediate etymological roots are the Medieval Latin and French words which meant "a compensation for loss", "ownership share" and "interest on money". In his book *Keywords* Raymond Williams notes that:

Most uses of *interest* before the Seventeenth Century referred to an objective or legal share of something, and the extended use, to refer to a natural share or common concern, was at first usually a conscious metaphor:

"Ah so much interest have (I) in thy sorrow
As I had Title in thy Noble Husband. (*Richard III*)"⁹⁴

An example of this "extended" use is "He has an interest in mathematics", meaning that he *likes* mathematics, is curious about it, or some such thing. Sometimes this sense is called a "psychological" sense of the word since it has to do with someone's psychology, specifically their "likes" or "desires" or "concerns". Among the "non-psychological" senses of the word 'interest' are:

- 1) *Money interest*—the price paid for borrowing money, as in "They had to pay 19% interest on their loan";
- 2) *Ownership share*—a right or legal share of something of value, as in "The Rockefellers have a 30% interest in this company";
- 3) *Beneficial interest*—something which benefits, or is to the advantage of a person or group of people, as in "Flood control projects are in the interest of the people who live along the river."

It is this last sense of the word which concerns us here. Someone's "interests", in this sense, are what benefits them or is to their advantage. This is the sense of the word 'interest' which

matters in the analysis of the word ‘good’ both in general and also specifically in ethics; and this is the sense assumed throughout this book (unless otherwise indicated).

Note carefully that in this “beneficial”, or “objective”, sense of ‘interest’, the individual’s (or group’s) psychology is completely irrelevant. The people who live along the river may *want* the flood control plan to be implemented, or may oppose it for some reason, or may be completely unaware of it. It is irrelevant if they are “interested” in the project (in the psychological sense), or not. And something may be in your interest even if you are not interested in it. (Two different senses of the word here.)

It is amazing to me that the very existence of this beneficial or objective sense of the word ‘interest’ has evidently not been noticed or separated out from the psychological sense by many people. Even Ziff, usually very alert to such nuances, does not seem to be aware of this, or of its importance.⁹⁵

A great many philosophers have gotten themselves into deep trouble because of the confusion of the psychological and objective senses of the word ‘interest’. We find the confusion in Hume, Bentham, John Stuart Mill and many others. The whole ethical theory of utilitarianism has been essentially vitiated by this confusion. (See chapter 9 for more on this.)

Since this is such an important point, I would like to illustrate the kind of mess you can get into with an example from the recently developed trend of “analytical Marxism”.⁹⁶ This school of “higher criticism” of Marxism seems to be characterized by an almost pedantic attention to detail, on the one hand, and a glaring obliviousness to the obvious, on the other hand.

In his book *Classes*, Eric Olin Wright has the following discussion about what he earlier calls “the knotty philosophical problems with the concept of ‘objective interests’”.⁹⁷ It should soon be apparent that these “knotty problems” are due entirely to the use of terms as ‘objective interests’ or ‘true interests’ in a psychological sense:

When Marxists talk about “objective interests” they are, in effect, saying that there are cases when choices can be made in which the actor has correct information and correct theories, but distorted subjective understanding of their *interests*, that is of the preferences they attach to different possible courses of action.

The problem of specifying true interests (undistorted preferences) is a difficult and contentious one...

There are two basic senses in which we can say that a person has a distorted understanding of their true interests. The first, and simplest, is when what a person “really wants” is blocked psychologically through some kind of mechanism. The preferences that are subjectively accessible—that are part of the individual’s “consciousness”—are therefore different from the preferences the individual would consciously hold in the absence of this block. The block in question is a real mechanism, obstructing awareness of preferences/wants that actually exist in the person’s subjectivity. If we understand the operation of such psychological obstructions, then we can say something about the character of the resulting distortions.

The second way in which we can talk about distorted preferences does not imply that the undistorted preferences are actually present in the individual’s subjectivity, only buried deep in the unconscious waiting to be uncovered. The second sense allows for the possibility that the distortion-mechanism operates at the level of the very formation of preferences in the first place. The obstruction, in a sense, is biographically historical; and the counterfactual is, therefore, a claim about what preferences the individual would have developed in the absence of such

distortion-mechanisms during the process of preference formation. The usual form of such an argument is to say that “true” interests are the interests actors would hold if their subjectivities were formed under conditions of maximum possible autonomy and self-direction.

There are advantages and disadvantages with each of these approaches. The first has the advantage of being much more tractable and potentially open to empirical investigation. It is limited, however, in its ability to contend with the deepest kinds of effects cultural practices may have on the subjectivities of actors. The second alternative, however, suffers from an almost inevitable speculative quality that may have a crucial critical function but which renders the concept very problematic within scientific explanations.

... To the extent that the conscious preferences of people lead them to make choices which reduce that capacity [to make choices] or block its expansion, then, I would say, they are acting against their “true” or “objective” class interests.⁹⁸

It is of course true that people sometimes have confused or conflicting preferences, and perhaps also “blocked” or “subconscious” desires. But this is all very secondary to the main point, that what are in people’s true interests are simply those things which truly benefit them, whether or not they are conscious of the fact *at any level*. There is no difficulty at all in distinguishing *true interests* (objective interests, in my sense) from *perceived interests*. It is a simple fact of life that we are not always aware of what really benefits us (of what really is in our own interest).

Once you identify interests with preferences (or desires, or wants, or any similar psychological states) you inevitably get into the predicament of trying to explain how our true interests (“undistorted preferences”) could possibly be unknown to us. Somehow we must have “preferences” which we do not prefer; or wants that we do not consciously want. All the psychological mumbo-jumbo in the world about “blocked” preferences and the like is not going to satisfactorily clear up such a quandary. How would you deal with newborn infants living by our hypothetical river, for example? It is also in *their* interests that the flood control project be built, but obviously they are completely incapable of forming any preferences or desires on the issue, “blocked”, “subconscious”, or otherwise.

The ambiguity between the objective and psychological senses of the word ‘interest’ is also one of the main factors behind the “problem of altruism”. The argument here is that nobody is really altruistic since everyone “inevitably” acts on their own interests, preferences or desires, which occasionally happen to also benefit others. Thus if Sue does a favor for Betty it is really done, perhaps, because Sue enjoys the “warm feeling” she gets when helping others; i.e., it is really done for her *own* benefit (“to induce internal warm feelings”).

Of course Sue helps Betty because she *desires* to, and if her interests were the same as what she desires, she would be acting in her own interests. But the point is, by doing that favor for Betty, Sue is consciously setting aside her own *objective interests* for the moment, and that is what altruism really is. People do often act against their own interests—against what benefits them—for one reason or another.

It is not difficult to see that any psychological sense of the word ‘interest’ will not do in the explication of ‘good’. If interests were identified with likes or desires, for example, then a good butcher knife would simply be one that someone likes or desires. Instead a good butcher knife has certain objective characteristics, regardless of any individual’s likes and desires, such as that it must retain its sharpness well, be properly shaped and balanced, not rust, etc. These are *objective*

features of a good butcher knife that answer to our (standard) objective, beneficial interests in butcher knives; i.e., it (normally) benefits us when butcher knives have these characteristics.

Of course it is also true that we are *generally* aware of our objective interests in butcher knives or anything else. And thus we generally come to have conscious, psychological interests which parallel our objective interests. But it is objective interests, and not the possibly accompanying psychological interests, which are the fundamental thing here, and that is especially true in morality.

There is a different point that must also be discussed here. It might be objected that we are approaching some circularity in our definitions, since ‘benefit’ seems to sneak back in the word ‘good’ in a Latin form. And certainly it seems most straightforward to define words like ‘benefit’ and ‘advantage’, if not in terms of each other, then at least in terms of “good”. But the circularity here tends to *confirm* our analysis and is by no means vicious. Consider, for example, a German-English/English-German dictionary which lists under ‘Blume’: “flower”, and under ‘flower’: “Blume”. This is circular and of no help to you if you don’t understand one of the words. But if you do know one, either one, it helps you understand the other by relating the two. (It would be very disconcerting to find that while ‘Blume’ means “flower”, ‘flower’ does not mean “Blume”!) Similarly our definitions of ‘good’, ‘interest’ ‘benefit’, etc., relate these words to each other and are helpful precisely because of that.

There is a point in carrying this game of further definition this far only to make clear which sense of the word ‘interest’ we are concerned with when we say that ‘good’ means “answering to certain interests”, ruling out for example any psychological interpretation in terms of “desires”. But it should be quite clear that in doing this we are *not* abandoning our definition of ‘good’ in terms of interests nor substituting for it a definition of ‘good’ in terms of “benefit” or “advantage”. We have not made the definition of ‘good’ in terms of interests superfluous; we have merely made it less prone to misinterpretation.

B. Who or What Can Be Said to Have Interests? Another question to consider is who, or what, can be said to have (beneficial) “interests”? Individual people, of course, but what about groups of people? What about animals? Inanimate objects? Or even immaterial things?

We will discuss the view that only individuals can be said to have interests in the next section. For now suffice it to say that we constantly speak of the interests of groups of people, such as the interests of families, workers, bankers, and so forth. The onus is on those who think that this is somehow invalid to prove their point.

Let us briefly explore the kinds of things to which we do commonly ascribe interests (beneficial interests). We can obviously speak of the interests of individual people and groups, such as the interests of:

- David Rockefeller
 - My family
 - My neighbors
 - Classes
 - The proletariat
 - The bourgeoisie
 - Bankers
- (“It’s in my neighbor’s interest that I not play my saxophone too loud.”)

- Farmers
- The masses
- The people
- Humanity

(But *not* “the interests of inhumanity”, evidently because “inhumanity” is not a group of people.)

Similarly we speak of the interests of human institutions, such as the interests of:

- The medical profession
- The government
- The Democratic Party
- Congress
- Cities
- The revolution
- Civilization

(But *not* “in the interests of barbarism”.)

And again, we speak of the interests of various human activities and pursuits, such as the interests of:

- Fire prevention
- Conservation
- Health
- Boxing

(But *not* “in the interests of disease”.)

(“Fixed fights are not in the interests of boxing.”)

- Physics
- History
- Production
- Good government
- Law and order
- Social change
- Revolution
- Peace
- (Winning) the war
- Liberalism
- Communism

(But *not* “in the interests of war” in general.)

The inadmissible negative cases above are instructive. It seems we cannot speak of the “interests” of disease, or barbarism, or inhumanity because *human beings* have no interests in these things (again: *no beneficial interests in them*). At this point we might hazard the hypothesis that such things as institutions, activities and pursuits can only be said to have “interests” because, and to the extent that, (some) *people* have objective interests in them.

Likewise we might occasionally speak in an elliptical fashion of the “interests” of certain inanimate objects for the same reason—because (some) people have interests in them. For example, the interests of:

- The land

(“It’s in the interests of the land that crops be rotated.” which is elliptical for “It’s in the interests of *humanity’s* dependence on the land that crops be rotated.”)

- The Parthenon (“It’s in the best interests of the Parthenon that it be protected from pollution.” which is elliptical for “It’s in the best interests of *humanity to preserve its cultural heritage and therefore that* the Parthenon be protected from pollution.”)

Nevertheless it would be quite extraordinary to speak of the “interests” of most inanimate objects—rocks, tools, nails, automobiles, etc.—even ones that people have interests in. One *could* say, I suppose, that “It is not in the interests of chisels to be used as screwdrivers” (meaning, presumably, that “It is not in the interests of those concerned with the care of chisels that they be used as screwdrivers”), but it would be far more natural to say that “It is not *good for* chisels to be used as screwdrivers.”

With animals the case seems to be different. Here it seems that anthropomorphism is at work. We can imagine things from the point of view of dogs and cats and even mice, as in: “It’s in the interest of mice that cats be belled.” But for microbes it would be very peculiar: **“It’s in the interest of microbes that antiseptics be outlawed.”* (The asterisk suggests that there is some sort of linguistic deviance.) Something can perhaps benefit microbes—an abundance of food, for example—but it is still peculiar to speak of an abundance of food (or anything else) being in the “interests” of microbes. We simply don’t view microbes as having things “in their interests”, and humans seldom look at things “from the point of view of microbes” even for a fanciful moment.

This point about anthropomorphism being involved in talk about animal’s “interests” is worth stressing since there are those who, failing to recognize this, have thought that animals should count equally with humans in morals since both can be said to have interests. (This will be further explored in sections 3.1 and 10.9.)

It may be true that part of the reason we are reluctant to view microbes and inanimate objects as having “interests” at all is because we can’t imagine them having any *psychological* interests, or any mental life of any kind. Since they can’t have psychological interests, we are perhaps reluctant to consider them as having *any* sort of “interests”, including objective, beneficial interests.

My primary claim, however, is that the sense of the word ‘interest’ that should concern us in ethics is “that which is beneficial or advantageous *to someone or a group*, where it is implicit that we are looking at things from the point of view of *people* or at least *beings somewhat like people* (i.e., beings which are sentient and intelligent). Thus things which have “interests”—even in the objective, non-psychological sense—must nevertheless, at a minimum, have brains and minds (or else be groups of those who have such, or be connected to such individuals or groups in some clear way). It is really no mystery here why *sentience* and *intelligence* are necessary for something to have interests, even when we are talking about interests in the objective, beneficial sense, since many other words such as ‘benefit’ and ‘advantage’ tend to have the same character (although with slightly different scopes or ranges of application, perhaps). That is, we speak of something benefiting humans, human institutions, animals, and the like, but it is strange to speak of something “benefiting” a chisel, a rock, or a cloud. Similarly, it is weird to speak of something either being to the advantage (or disadvantage) of chisels, rocks, or clouds.

The fact is that many words are applied primarily to humans, groups of people, and by extension, human institutions, and *sometimes* partially human-like things such as animals, etc. Given that we are social animals, it is not really very strange that humans should be so central in the human view of the world or that many of our concepts should have been formed primarily in

connection with human beings.⁹⁹ On the contrary, it would have been inexplicable if things were otherwise.

C. Common, Collective Interests. In the previous sub-section it was pointed out that both individuals and groups of people can be said to have interests. At least we certainly speak that way all the time. But there is a quite common dogma that only individuals can “really” have interests, not groups. Melvin Rader, for example, states:

Nothing can literally have an interest except an individual. Within the family, each member has interests, and these interests are affected by the family *esprit de corps* and by the relations between the members of the family. But the interests of the family are nevertheless the interests of the father, the mother, and each of the children—these and nothing more. There are no family interests over and above these individual interests. And what is true of a group of a few members is also true of a group of many members, even a vast nation. It too has no interests that are not the interests of its members, because it has no mind apart from the minds of its members.¹⁰⁰

The only real argument that Rader provides here is in the last sentence, where it is apparent that he must be using the term ‘interest’ in a psychological sense. And in fact, he explicitly stated earlier that

The term *interest* is here used in an inclusive sense to mean any attitude of liking or disliking, of prizing or disprizing, of preference, selection, appreciation, or appraisal. It involves feeling, emotion, desire, will, or some similar attitude.¹⁰¹

These are all mentalistic or psychological terms. Rader’s argument thus depends for its plausibility on the use of the word ‘interest’ in a psychological sense—which we are not concerned with—and is only relevant to beneficial or objective interest insofar as one blurs the two senses. Unfortunately, it has been all too common to do this in philosophy. And in fact this is what Rader is doing as well:

... I shall maintain that intrinsic value resides in interest, primarily in the fulfillment of interest. It follows that the locus of intrinsic value is the individual because the individual, after all, is the seat of interest. The group exists for the sake of the individual, and not the individual for the sake of the group. The welfare of human beings, therefore, is what counts, and not the “good” of the state, the nation, the race, or the “working class”.¹⁰²

The above argument is sneaky, though perhaps only unconsciously so. First of all, Rader correctly states that “intrinsic value” can only be analyzed in terms of interests. But this is only valid if the *interests* are objective, beneficial interests—not if they are psychological interests (what people want, desire, appreciate, etc.). Rader has the words right; but either he is incorrect in his understanding of what these words have to mean here, or else he is confusing and switching two senses of the term as his argument requires.

Second of all, Rader pulls a sneaky trick in contrasting “the welfare of human beings” with the “good” of *various subsets* of humanity as a whole, in particular three subsets (state, nation, race) *which almost everyone knows* must be subordinate to the welfare of humanity as a whole. One ironic thing here is that even in speaking of “the welfare of human beings” he is inadvertently speaking in terms of *collective beneficial interests* (not of the separate individual psychological interests he pretends to be), and is really contrasting the collective interests of humanity as a whole against those of subsections of humanity. If Rader had contrasted “the individual welfare of human beings taken as a whole” against the “collective welfare of human

beings”, his whole argument would have collapsed into incoherence—because the two are in essence the same!

The fourth subset he mentions—and obviously it is the Marxist point of view that he is really out to attack—is the working class. And here we have the biggest irony in the passage. In fact, his sentence is literally correct, *but what he means by it, what he thinks he is saying*, is totally wrong! It is actually the case that the welfare of humanity as a whole does come before the welfare of the working class. Contrary to what Rader believes, *this is the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist viewpoint!*¹⁰³ What bourgeois ideologists can never understand or accept is that the only path toward securing the welfare of the people as a whole lies through proletarian revolution, which is to say, focusing on the real interests of the working class first and foremost. (How this apparent contradiction gets resolved is gone into in detail in this book, especially in chapters 6 and 7.)

Well, let us set aside the more ridiculous assertion of the “individualists” and accept the common sense point of view that groups of people can in fact have collective interests, at least in our sense, where such interests are things which benefit these groups. Some things benefit the people as a whole—such as the continued capability of the earth to support human life. And some things benefit subgroups—such as the continued existence of capitalism benefiting those who wish to exploit other people.

But there is a lesser, somewhat more plausible claim that can be made. Recognizing that of course groups of people can have collective interests, the claim is that these collective interests amount to no more than shared individual interests. That is, if a group can be correctly said to have a collective interest in something, then every individual member of that group (it is supposed) must have that same interest.

This is something which is often true, but not always. Sometimes there are even things which are in the common interest of a group which are not (at least precisely in the same form) in the individual interest of *any* member of the group! Consider the bourgeoisie. As we will discuss further in chapter 5, in essence the basic “moral principle” (if it can be called that) of each individual member of the bourgeoisie is “look out for number one”. In fact, most members of the bourgeoisie attempt to put this maxim into practice, with only slight modifications. However, while it is in the interest of any bourgeois individual to do anything and everything that benefits himself, whether or not it is at the expense of others, this type of behavior can actually be destructive to bourgeois society if it is not considerably restrained. Thus the more farsighted members of the bourgeoisie set up rules for what is “fair” (legal) and what is not, in the dog-eat-dog fray. It is not in the individual interest of any bourgeois to be restrained in his or her own pursuit of wealth; but it is in the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole that at least some restraints be put in place, and some effort be made to stop those (such as the Mafia, and most other businessmen when they think they can get away with it) who ignore such restraints.

Rousseau, incidentally, was quite aware of this point, and in fact it figured prominently in his social theory:

There is often a great difference between the will of all [what all individuals want] and the general will; the general will studies only the common interest while the will of all studies private interest, and is indeed no more than the sum of individual desires. But if we take away from these same wills, the pluses and minuses which cancel each other out, the sum of the difference is the general will.

...If there were no different interests, we should hardly be conscious of a common interest, as there would be no resistance to it; everything would run easily of its own accord, and politics would cease to be an art.¹⁰⁴

Ignoring Rousseau's psychological focus, what is being said here is that the common interests of members of a group must be abstracted from their individual interests, and are by no means always identical to their shared individual interests. Quite a sophisticated observation for 1762! (Rousseau's second paragraph above, which was actually part of a footnote in *The Social Contract*, is also perspicacious. It is *one* of the reasons for believing that the state can someday wither away, that in fact communist society can be expected to run very smoothly, once we finally get to it.)

Thus, groups, classes, etc., do sometimes have interests above and beyond those of their individual members.

Before closing this subsection, I would like to return to one more comment made by Melvin Rader in the passage quoted earlier, which superficially sounds rather sensible: "The group exists for the sake of the individual, and not the individual for the sake of the group." Do I really object to this? Yes, I do! Humans are social creatures by nature; we cannot live alone apart from society.¹⁰⁵ We depend on society and therefore have an obligation to society. In actual fact the group does exist for the individual, but just as truly the individual also exists for the group. The human motto is "All for one, and one for all." Rader, like every bourgeois individualist, wants to drop the "one for all" part.

D. Is 'Interest' a Moral Term? If moral expressions are to be explicated in terms of people's interests the question arises: Is 'interest' itself a moral term? In talking about interests are we engaged in discussion of morality? It seems to me that the answer is "no" for a couple of reasons.

First, because a concept **A** helps explicate a concept **B**, is not a sufficient reason for saying that concept **A** is in the same category as concept **B**. Consider for example the category *colors* which includes red, blue, green and so forth. We can explicate 'red', to a degree, by pointing out that red light is light "which has a wavelength between (approximately) 6220 and 7700 angstroms. However, this last phrase is not itself a color nor is it, nor any part of it, in the same category with red, blue and green.

Second, discussion of people's interests has rarely been considered moral discussion in the past. Indeed, very often the two have been completely opposed in such discussions, the standard theme (in Kant for example) being morality *versus* interests and expediency. It is true that many philosophers have brought up the concept of people's interests in discussing the nature of morality—few of them viewing the concept as being of central importance, however. Even those few philosophers who have considered 'interest' to be a key concept in ethics have not generally viewed the word 'interest' itself as a moral term.

Jeremy Bentham did say, however, that "the interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals..." but unfortunately Bentham was unable to appreciate the importance of his own remark since he rejected the idea of common or collective interests as being anything more than the sum total of individual selfish interests (a quintessential bourgeois viewpoint), and because his view of 'interests' was a psychological one, itself explicated in terms of pleasure.¹⁰⁶ (For more on Bentham see chapter 9.)

But it could be objected that past practice should be abandoned here: given that the concept of “people’s interests” does correctly explicate traditional moral terms, we should *from now on* view the phrase ‘people’s interests’ as a moral expression. Possibly such a change may happen in the future, to one degree or another. But despite this there will still be an important distinction between discussion of what is “good” and “right” and “what you ought to do”, on the one hand, and “what is in the people’s interests to do”, on the other hand.

Talk of interests gets to the heart of the matter; it is less indirect, less obscure, much less prone to idealist obfuscation, and therefore to be preferred whether or not it is considered to be moral terminology *per se*. It seems to me that we should follow the example of the great Marxist leaders and teachers in this regard and strive to *replace*, wherever possible, what has always been considered moral expressions with a discussion of people’s interests and those of social classes. In other words, instead of worrying about *extending* moral terminology to include expressions like ‘people’s interests’ and ‘class interests’, it seems simpler and more straightforward to ignore the old obscure expressions to the extent possible and speak directly of the essence, people’s interests, which lie behind all that “moral palaver”—though not always very obviously.

2.10 The Clarifying Language of “Interests” versus Mystifying Moral Language

If ‘interest’ were just another moral term, just as obscure in meaning and therefore just as mystifying as the rest, then there would be no real point in dwelling on it. There would be no more value in defining ‘good’ and the other words commonly associated with moral language in terms of “interests” than there would be in defining ‘good’ in terms of “right”, or “justice”, or “duty”. There would be no real clarification involved.

Part of the trouble is that all these common moral terms, ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘moral’, ‘just’, ‘moral obligation’, ‘ought’, ‘duty’, etc., are fairly close synonyms. True, some of them strongly include the idea of “obligation” which is more implicit in the others. And some of them are slightly more general than others (with ‘good’ being the most general). Some, like ‘right’ focus mostly on characterizing actions or activities, while others can also be used to characterize humans, groups, and other agents. And of course one whole other group (‘bad’, ‘wrong’, ‘unjust’, etc.) is used to characterize agents or actions in the opposite, negative way. So, yes, there definitely are *some* semantic differences between any two moral terms. Nevertheless, as a whole, they are quite close in meaning *and abstractness*, and one moral term can quite often be substituted for another in some particular context with very little change in meaning.

In order to bring real clarification into our definitions of moral terms we have to define them not in terms of each other, but rather in terms of *what really lies behind them all*. And what actually does lie behind them all are the *interests* of individuals and groups of people. When we define moral words and phrases in terms of interests we bring in *something new*, a *new concept* which serves to explicate all the old terminology.

There are many analogies here; we could for example point to the clarification and explication of the concept of ‘color’ that came about when it was determined that different colors are (basically) the result of different wavelengths of light impinging on our retinas. Or the clarification of biological inheritance that came about when the basic principles of genetics were discovered. Sometimes in order to more deeply understand something at one level we have to develop at least a beginning understanding of it at a deeper level.

Another important reason why discussion in terms of people's interests provides more clarification, than does a parallel discussion in moral terminology, is that much more *subjectivity* is involved in moral discourse. I should immediately say that I do not think that moral statements are themselves always or necessarily subjective! In one sense, at least, there is actually nothing at all subjective about statements such as "Imperialism is wrong!" or "The capitalist system is evil." Those are simple objective facts. However, comments like these certainly *appear to be very subjective* to some people!

Statements couched in moral terminology can themselves be as true and objective as statements about the arrangement of the furniture in your apartment. But the difference is that when two people are standing in your living room they are not normally going to disagree about where the furniture is. There will not be big disputes about whether or not the sofa is "really" by the window, or whether the TV is "really" against the opposite wall. But people do disagree about moral evaluations all the time. One will argue that abortion is (morally) wrong, while another will vociferously deny it. One will say that capital punishment is wrong, while another will say that it is a good and necessary thing. If a capitalist and his workers could ever be brought together for a free and open discussion about whether the latest cut in real wages or health benefits for workers at the company was good or not, there would be two very opposed views on the matter. But *why* is it so clear to everyone what the objective situation is when we are talking about the furniture arrangement and so contentious when we are talking about what is good or bad, right or wrong?

The answer to this is that while the moral statements themselves are true or false, it is very easy to have totally subjective ideas *about the truth* of those moral statements. And the reason that this is easy is that there is nothing obvious to point to in order to back up your position. When it comes to moral language people are able to argue over what is actually good or right with the impunity that comes from knowing that they can't be seen to be obviously wrong no matter what they say! On the other hand, whether something is actually in someone's interests or not is far more obvious and less disputable.

In other words, moral language appears to be more subjective, and is so much easier to be subjective *about*, simply because it is more abstract language, language in which the underlying interests of people is no longer explicit, and *has apparently been abstracted out*.

In the case of the capitalist and "his" workers "discussing" the latest cut in health benefits, for example, it would be hard for even the capitalist to deny that this harms the *interests* of the workers. (He would be reduced to arguing that somehow it would at least be in the workers' long-term interests, since—he might claim—the company would go bankrupt otherwise, or some such thing. Of course then the workers—if they are class conscious—might reply that the inability of the capitalist system to provide decent healthcare for everyone only provides further proof that it is in their long-term class interests to get rid of the whole capitalist system entirely!)

In many cases there will still be disputes even when the question of interests is brought to the fore. In the abortion case, for example, there can still be a dispute over the correctness of allowing abortion. But at least now the dispute will be much clearer. Instead of arguing over abstract moral maxims and their applicability ("Is abortion murder?") we are now talking about the interests of the pregnant woman versus the possible interests of the fetus. (I'll discuss the abortion issue in more depth in chapter 6.) In the case of the debate about capital punishment, the discussion would be shifted to weighing the interests of human beings who are about to be put to death, versus the presumed interests of society in punishing and (possibly) preventing some crimes.

When we frame such disputes in terms of interests we can be more explicit, more concrete and more objective. Much of the time we can all even be calmer and more rational! And that is a very welcome development considering the notorious heat, and emotion-based irrationality typical of abstract moral arguments.

This is *why* we revolutionaries should—as much as is possible—talk in terms of the conflicting interests of different groups (and especially classes) of people, *rather than* simply joining all the frantic yelling about what is right or wrong. It is not that many things are *not* correctly categorized as right or wrong; it is simply that behind that, in any case, are the interests of different groups of people, and it is much more *to the point* to get right down to discussing those interests.

All moral language can be translated into the clarifying language of the common, collective interests of the people; all “subjective” moral arguments can be reframed in the more objective language of people’s interests. And as a general rule of thumb, this is exactly what we should try to do. Yes, this may not always be completely feasible, since in our present culture moral language is so central to people’s thinking. (More on this point later.) But at least when talking about what is good or bad, right or wrong, we should generally also go on to bring out and emphasize the matter of just whose interests are involved and what those interests are. We should always strive to clarify abstract moralistic language by explaining the beneficial interests (for some group or other) which stand behind it.

2.11 Did Marx Reject Morality?

Marx often laughed at moralistic language. That’s a fact! But what does this actually mean? That Marx was immoral? That he was amoral? Or what?!

The first thing to consider here is that it is utterly ridiculous to suppose that Marx’s views on ethics were absolutely constant from his early youth until his death. Marx was, if anything, a deep thinker, and that means that he changed many of his views over time.¹⁰⁷ This book is about the MLM interest-based theory of ethics, and not about Marx’s views specifically, let alone the development of his views. But I will note that in his very early writings Marx did use moralistic language; in the period of *The German Ideology* (1845-6) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx and Engels very much avoided moralistic language and even seemed to be hostile to the whole idea of morality; and in their most mature later period they still usually carefully avoided moralistic language while developing a more sophisticated view of morality and moral systems (as presented, for example, by Engels in *Anti-Dühring*). Thus the hostility by Marx (and Engels) toward the very idea of morality is mostly from that middle period (of the mid and late 1840s primarily).

However, even in *The Holy Family* (1845) Marx and Engels began to explain the underpinnings of morality in terms of group interests. In the course of discussing the great French materialist philosophers of the Enlightenment, they wrote:

There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, and the influence of the environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessary materialism is connected with communism and socialism. If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it, then what has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way

that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as man. **If correctly understood interest is the principle of all morality, man's private interest must be made to coincide with the interest of humanity.** If man is unfree in the materialistic sense, i.e., is free not through the negative power to avoid this or that, but through the positive power to assert his true individuality, crime must not be punished in the individual, but the anti-social sources of crime must be destroyed, and each man must be given social scope for the vital manifestation of his being. If man is shaped by environment, his environment must be made human. If man is social by nature, he will develop his true nature only in society, and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of the separate individual but by the power of society.¹⁰⁸

I put one sentence in the above quotation in bold type to give it extra emphasis. Marx and Engels seem very clearly here to be agreeing with the premise that “correctly understood interest is the principle of all morality” and then go on to draw what they appropriately view as an obvious conclusion from that fact, that “man's private interest must be made to coincide with the interest of humanity”. (We will discuss more comments by Marx and Engels on *interests* in chapter 9.)

It is therefore quite certain that Marx's opposition to *moral language* cannot be construed as being the same thing as opposition to *being moral!* To be moral is to act in accordance with the common, collective interests of the people, and Marx and Engels certainly *never* opposed that! But they did oppose moral terminology precisely because it was so easily hijacked by those who were actually opposed to the interests of the people. Their comments against morality—even when at their most “extreme”—were actually against moralistic terminology, and not against being moral. In fact, it is totally obvious that both Marx and Engels devoted their entire lives to working to promote the interests of the working class and the masses, and in particular, their central interest in making social revolution, overthrowing capitalism, and creating a classless, communist society.

So, for us Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, Marx's position here presents no problems at all. But it is sometimes rather humorous to read what various other people have had to say about this. Many bourgeois ideologists have been happy to jump to the conclusion that Marx opposed morality, and that he was “immoral” down to his very core. (We'll discuss some of their comments in later chapters.) On the other hand, even some of those who are sympathetic to Marx and Marxism have been sorely troubled by Marx's comments and attitude. Let me give just one example, that of the social democrat Brian Morton who once wrote in *The Nation* that

After his beautiful philosophical work of the 1840s, Marx turned away from the language of morality. He grew so disgusted with the hypocrisies of bourgeois morality that he began to style himself an antimoralist, delighting in reductive demonstrations that moral claims were nothing more than masks for economic interests. Bending to a Darwinist age, he began to write as if socialism were an inevitability rather than a future that men and women might choose. He began to write in a less human voice. If you want to spend a month or so in the library you can come up with a strong case that Marx remained a humanist, remained an advocate of freedom to the end. But I've often wished that his voice were so humane, so generous, that this would be obvious to anyone who glanced at his work.¹⁰⁹

People like Morton *object* to translating moral terminology into the clarified terminology of class interests! They think that talking about class interests rather than questions of right and wrong is to (at least on the face of it) abandon “humanism”, generosity, and a focus on human freedom. They long for a return to the sort of obscurantist moralistic language in which they themselves think about the world. One could even say that they generally remain at heart merely

somewhat-radical, bourgeois liberals who still *think* in the internally confused way that bourgeois liberals do.

Nevertheless it could well be maintained that there is at least a difference, or different emphasis, between Marx and many other Marxists themselves (notably including Lenin) about morality and the use of moralistic language. I think there is less of a difference here “between Marx and Lenin” than many people suppose, especially if we are talking about Marx’s mature position. Yet I would grant that Lenin, at least in his 1920 speech, *The Tasks of the Youth Leagues*, seemed more overtly willing to promote morality and moralistic language than Marx probably was. Even so, the central thrust of Lenin’s speech (as we saw earlier) was to show that “communist morality” (or what I would rather call *proletarian morality*) is that which promotes the revolutionary class interests of the proletariat and broad masses.

I think that both the mature Marx and Engels, as well as Lenin, realized that moralistic language cannot be completely dispensed with at this stage in history, and therefore that we cannot completely avoid all reference to good and bad, right and wrong, justice and injustice. And certainly many others, including many who are firmly on the side of the workers and masses, will continue to use moralistic language to talk about the contemporary situation even if those with a deeper understanding of morality avoid such terminology much of the time.

Consequently, given this situation, we must have a more complex attitude toward moralistic language. We should:

- Try to avoid using it ourselves, at least most of the time, and speak instead directly of class interests.
- When we do use it, try to simultaneously explicate it in terms of what actually lies behind it, namely, the common, collective interests of groups of people (and, in class society, the common, collective interests of different social classes).
- And, recognizing that moralistic language will still be a major part of the thinking of the masses and in widespread public political discourse in any case, conduct a serious, continuing campaign to educate people about not only the class interests that lie behind morality, but also the ease with which the enemy can often fool the people with their arguments framed in lying moral language.

In short, we must help the people come to understand both the real meaning of moral terminology, and also how their enemies frequently use such moralistic language to trick them. People must come to both properly understand moral language, and to seriously *distrust it!*

Notes

¹ Georg Eccarius, “A Review of the Literature on the *Coup d’Etat*”, *The People’s Paper*, No. 24, (Oct. 16, 1852), included in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, (NY: International, 1979), vol. 11, p. 603. [Hereinafter abbreviated in the form: MECW 11:603.] Marx assisted Eccarius in writing this series of newspaper articles.

² K. Vorländer, *Marx und Kant* (Vienna: Deutschen Worte, 1904), p. 22. Quoted in Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 27.

³ V. I. Lenin, “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues”, Speech delivered at the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League, Oct. 2, 1920, *Collected Works* [4th English ed.], (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), vol. 31, pp. 283-299. References to Lenin’s *Collected Works* are hereafter referred to in abbreviated form, e.g., LCW 31:283-299.

⁴ Long after I identified this as a key point for any essay on MLM ethics, I found that a bourgeois writer, Philip T. Grier, had also characterized this issue in much the same way: “the central task and challenge of Marxist-Leninist ethical theory.” [*Marxist Ethical Theory in the Soviet Union*, (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1978), p.100.]

⁵ Well, actually, in the decades after I wrote that I did include my solution to this “conundrum” in a Jan. 1996 review of a book on morality by Bob Avakian. (See: <http://www.massline.org/Philosophy/ScottH/Avaketh.htm>) I am basically using that same passage again in this essay, only slightly revised and expanded.

⁶ A “god”, in any normal sense of the term, is not just some powerful extraterrestrial who has powers to affect the world in ways that we do not understand. (Under that extremely crude, but more rational conception, humans today are “gods” in relation to more primitive peoples of the past—except for the fact that so far we have all been born on Earth.) Instead, gods are virtually always presumed to have characteristics or powers that are inherently inexplicable in scientific terms, such as guaranteed immortality. The most central of these characteristics in the usual conception of the “God” of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is as *an immaterial being who nevertheless thinks and has other mental capabilities*. The primary, and for me the absolutely conclusive, scientific proof that no God can possibly exist is simply the conclusion arising out of contemporary cognitive psychology that thinking and other mental phenomena are *only explicable* as the functional characteristics of the operation of certain complex organizations of physical matter (e.g., brains and very sophisticated computer equivalents). This is how science has now come to understand what mental phenomena *actually are*, which means that any thinking entity must of necessity have a material, physical existence (with all the inherent limitations and vulnerabilities that that implies). Even some hypothesized thinking entity on some virtual machine must ultimately have a physical basis on some real underlying physical computer.

I have no doubt that if humanity somehow survives our present intellectually primitive capitalist era, this point will come to be viewed as totally obvious by everyone. But today very few people—even among those with good scientific educations—yet understand this fundamental point. Even many cognitive scientists themselves do not yet understand this! And even most of those who campaign for atheism do not have much of an inkling of this central scientific disproof of the existence of “God”! There is something about the prevailing primitive idealist conceptions of the world which apparently makes this point extremely hard to grasp. Because of this, to really demonstrate it for contemporary society would require not just a paragraph (which will someday be quite enough), but probably numerous long, and powerfully written essays and books. And I doubt very much if even *that* would suffice for most people today!

⁷ Besides the Golden Rule, the Eye-for-an-eye theory, and probably others, there may even be at some places in the Bible the suggestion that we shouldn't morally judge people at all! In Romans 14:10 Paul says: "But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." And then in verse 13 he adds: "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in *his* brother's way." The context suggests that Paul may only be talking about various sectarian religious rites, beliefs and actions. But many Christians prefer to interpret the Bible in an absolutist and ultra-literal fashion, and if that is done here Paul comes across as something of an amoralist! Similarly in 1st Corinthians 10:23 we find this amazingly stark comment: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient..."

⁸ Chad Hansen, "Classical Chinese Ethics", in: Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993 (1991)), p. 72.

⁹ George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, "Maxims for Revolutionists: The Golden Rule". (1930) Shaw added: "The golden rule is that there are no golden rules."

¹⁰ Artur Schopenhauer, quoted in: Rudolf Fleisch, ed., *The New Book of Unusual Quotations*, (NY: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 141.

¹¹ Onora O'Neill, "Kantian Ethics", in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Blackwell, 1993), p. 177.

¹² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (NY: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 373-4. Also available online at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/study_philosophy/ch01.htm#s24 Gramsci goes on to say:

"The objection which would not seem right is this: that 'similar conditions' do not exist because among the conditions one must include the agent, his individuality, etc. What one can say is that Kant's maxim is connected with his time, with the cosmopolitan enlightenment and the critical conception of the author. In brief, it is linked to the philosophy of the intellectuals as a cosmopolitan stratum. Therefore the agent is the bearer of the 'similar conditions' and indeed their creator. That is, he 'must' act according to a 'model' which he would like to see diffused among all mankind, according to a type of civilization for whose coming he is working or for whose preservation he is 'resisting' the forces that threaten its disintegration."

¹³ Kant did in fact claim that lying is *always wrong*, at least once you have stated that you are telling the truth. See Roger J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 58-59 for a discussion of this. Sullivan tries to get Kant off the hook (of pushing his ethical theory to an absurd conclusion) by claiming that in the circumstances where lying would actually be appropriate we can instead equivocate, or give non-committal answers. But, first, this is *not* always possible, and second, even when these things are possible, in many cases they still amount to the same thing as lying.

¹⁴ I heard this particular counterexample from Paul Ziff, in a philosophy class he taught at the University of Wisconsin in 1965 or 1966.

¹⁵ Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativism* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1932).

¹⁶ Lenin, "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues" (Oct. 2, 1920), LCW 31:291.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, LCW 31:291.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, LCW 31:293.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, LCW 31:294.

²⁰ Ibid., LCW 31:295.

²¹ Karl Marx, *Preface and Introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy"*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), pp. 3-5.

²² Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, (NY: International, 1976), vol. 5, pp. 446-7. (Hereafter referred to in abbreviated form, e.g., MECW 5:446-7.) Emphasis in original.

²³ Ibid., MECW 5:231. All brackets (except the last one I inserted to explain who "Saint Max" is) are in the original English translation. See also pages 277ff.

²⁴ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 38.

²⁵ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 31.

²⁶ There is no doubt that as a whole linguistic or analytic philosophy plays a reactionary role in the struggle of ideas. But it is a diverse and inconsistent "school", and within it there are some trends which at least sometimes point in a scientific direction. In this book I rely heavily on the work of the American analytic philosopher Paul Ziff (1920-2003). Although Ziff was not a Marxist, in my opinion his work on the semantic analysis of the word 'good' (which is really an example of scientific linguistics, not philosophy) fits beautifully with traditional Marxist ethical theory. Marxism is by no means opposed to linguistic science whether it is called linguistics or linguistic *philosophy*.

²⁷ There is much more to be said on the relation of philosophy to ordinary language, but this is not the place to do it. For some further discussion (which has both its insights and limitations) see the British revisionist philosopher Maurice Cornforth, *Marxism and the Linguistic Philosophy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1967), especially pp. 165-169.

²⁸ Crane Brinton, *A History of Western Morals*, (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1959).

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 5-7.

³⁰ John Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1970 (1962)), pp. 71-73.

³¹ For more criticism of the view that 'good' means "commending", see Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), sections 228-232.

³² Ibid., p. 1.

³³ (Springfield, Mass: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1971 (1961)).

³⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Ed. (1989), entry on 'good' starts by saying that 'good' is "The most general adj. of commendation, implying the existence in a high, or at least satisfactory, degree of characteristic qualities which are either admirable in themselves or useful for some purpose." This definition would be improved if the first 6 words were omitted! Definition "I.1" for the adjective 'good' says "Of things: Having in adequate degree those properties which a thing of the kind ought to have" which is not too bad a definition (though not as good as the one I will discuss in the text). But definition "2.a" goes off on the wrong track again: "Of persons, as a term of indefinite commendation."

Sidney I. Landau, in his book *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989), remarks that *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* "is very much oriented toward precision at the expense of ease of understanding for the generalist", and then quite appropriately goes on to say "The OED, on the other hand, takes an entirely different tack, directing its definitions always to the generalist, even though the specialist may be frustrated by what he views as the inadequacy of the definition." [P. 137]

-
- ³⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (1979), article on “Semantics”, vol. 16, p. 511.
- ³⁶ *Webster’s Basic English Dictionary*, (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1990). This dictionary was originally published in 1986 under the name *Webster’s Elementary Dictionary*. I should note that this dictionary is actually a very good dictionary. It is produced by Merriam-Webster, which prepares the very best American dictionaries. It is simplified, but only by omitting uncommon uses of words and by giving definitions in more basic language. The definitions it gives are *not* necessarily less accurate! As the Preface of the book says, “*Webster’s Basic English Dictionary* is intended to serve the needs of those dictionary users who are looking for information about the most common words of our language in their most frequently encountered uses. Clarity of presentation and ease of use, rather than a very large number of entries, have been the principal concerns of the editors.”
- ³⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, source unknown, quoted in Laurence J. Peter, *Peter’s Quotations: Ideas For Our Time* (NY: Bantam, 1979), p. 298.
- ³⁸ I take it that “the good” is elliptical for “those things which are good” in the same way that “the small” is elliptical for “those things which are small”. There is no doubt, however, that speaking of “the good” is to a certain extent a form of hypostatization. That is, it further confuses the issue.
- ³⁹ Melvin Rader, *Ethics and Society* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1968 (1950)), p. 21.
- ⁴⁰ William Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Boston: 1811), pp. 61, 65ff., quoted in Melvin Rader, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- ⁴¹ J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 25.
- ⁴² T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883).
- ⁴³ Albert Schweitzer, *Philosophy of Civilization*, (NY: Macmillan, 1951), p. 310; and, Albert Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, (NY: New American Library, 1953), p. 181.
- ⁴⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, iv, prop. 8, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 198; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 1, book II, chapter xxi, section 43, (NY: Dover, 1959), p. 340.; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, iii, I, 2 (Oxford, England: 1896), p. 472; and, Jeremy Bentham, “An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation”, Chapter I, section III, included in Mary Peter Mack, ed., *A Bentham Reader*, (NY: Pegasus, 1969), p. 86. For more on Bentham’s version of this theory see the section on utilitarianism later in this book.
- ⁴⁵ Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Goodness*, (NY: Macmillan, 1961), p. 343.
- ⁴⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932).
- ⁴⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, i.6, (Oxford: 1881), P. 35.
- ⁴⁸ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, iii, prop. 9, in edition cited, p. 137.
- ⁴⁹ F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, (London: 1915), p. 402.
- ⁵⁰ John Milton, *Comus* (1637), quoted in H. L. Mencken, *A new Dictionary of Quotations...*, (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 474. I assume Milton is using the word ‘delicious’ in its older, wider sense of “what is pleasing to the senses”.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in Laurence J. Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- ⁵² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵³ Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968 (1944)), p. 81. Stevenson says, however, that this is just a “first approximation” to a correct analysis.

⁵⁴ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968 (1952)), p. 94. As noted in my text, this view was (is) also held by John Austin and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 399. Rawls goes on to define what a good X for a person K is, and so forth, and remarks that all these definitions are for “simpler cases”.

⁵⁶ Ashley Montagu, *Anthropology and Human Nature*, (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1963 (1957)), chapter 5, p. 56.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, II (1888).

⁵⁸ Quoted in Laurence J. Peter, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

⁵⁹ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, I (1903).

⁶⁰ Quoted in James R. Newman, *The World of Mathematics*, (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1956), vol. IV, p. 2198.

⁶¹ The exceptions (and there are lots of them) are the many scientific and technical terms, which dictionary makers—and everyone else—must learn by looking into the scientific books and articles where they are either explicitly or implicitly defined. (However, “implicit” definition here means something close to “defined by the very specialized contexts”!)

⁶² The exceptions *might* be for color words such as ‘blue’, ‘magenta’, etc., and other words for what some philosophers call “qualia” or directly experienced abstract perceptual properties of things.

⁶³ D. A. Cruse, *Lexical Semantics*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991 (1986)), p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15. Cruse continues: “That which is not mirrored in this way is not, for us, a question of meaning; and, conversely, every difference in the semantic normality profile between two items betokens a difference of meaning. The full set of normality relations which a lexical item contracts with all conceivable contexts will be referred to as its **contextual relations**. We shall say, then, that the meaning of a word is fully reflected in its contextual relations; in fact, we can go further, and say that, for present purposes, the meaning of a word is constituted by its contextual relations.” (pp. 15-16) He adds, a few pages later, that “our [contextual] conception of word-meaning has the advantage of being intuitively plausible: its scope coincides well with the pre-theoretical notion of word-meaning that anyone with a practical interest in meaning—a lexicographer, translator, or language teacher, or even a novelist or poet—is likely to have.” (p. 19)

⁶⁵ V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, (NY: Seminar Press, 1973 (1929)), translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, p. 79-80. According to the biographical note on the jacket of his book, Voloshinov disappeared in the purges of the 1930s. “He had been a close associate of M. M. Baxtin and a key member of the circle of young Marxist scholars which gathered around Baxtin in Leningrad in the late ’20s and early ’30s. In addition to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, his known published works include a book on Freudianism (Leningrad, 1928) and several journal articles. No information about his early life, education, career, or about the charges leveled against him or his subsequent fate has ever come to light.”

⁶⁶ Article on “Semantics”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1979, vol. 16, p. 511. This article was written by Zeno Vendler.

⁶⁷ Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 147.

⁶⁸ See for example Neil Smith & Deirdre Wilson, *Modern Linguistics: The Results of Chomsky's Revolution*, (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1980), p. 281.

⁶⁹ H. A. Gleason puts it this way: "For the identification of morphemes we seek the smallest differences of expression which exist with A PARTIAL DIFFERENCE of content... The phoneme is the smallest significant unit in the expression which can be correlated with ANY difference in the content structure. The morpheme is the smallest significant unit in the expression which can be correlated with any ONE PARTICULAR difference in the content structure." [H. A. Gleason, *Introduction to Descriptive Linguistics*, (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, revised edition, 1961), p. 67.]

⁷⁰ Ziff, op. cit., p. 148.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 187.

⁷² Article on "Semantics", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, referred to earlier.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ One early pair of writers on semantics who held the position that there is no root meaning to 'good' is C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards, in their book *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: 1927), pp. 124ff. But there have been many others who agreed, including Wittgenstein.

⁷⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (NY: Macmillan, 1953), section 77.

⁷⁶ Ibid., section 43.

⁷⁷ Ziff, op. cit., p. 70.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 158.

⁷⁹ Ibid., chapter VI.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 247.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 236.

⁸² Ibid., p. 195.

⁸³ There are some interesting exceptions to the generalization that "a bad X" always means the opposite of "a good X". Suppose some Hollywood producer of disaster movies, like Irwin Allen, decides to make a movie about a train wreck. He stages a series of train wrecks which just aren't spectacular enough. Finally he gets one that is sensational, with a huge explosion and bodies flying every which way. (Ah, bourgeois culture!) He immediately exclaims "Fine! Great! Now *that's* a good train wreck!" Why? Because it is such a bad train wreck! In this case the producer's non-standard set of interests in such an event make the difference.

A different sort of case occurs in the expression which is (or used to be) heard mostly among young Black people, "Those are *bad* shoes!", where the intonation pattern indicates a special use of the word 'bad' meaning something like "extremely good"!

⁸⁴ The fact that 'right' and 'wrong' refer, either entirely or at least typically, to *actions* has been noted by many, including William K. Frankena, in his book *Thinking About Morality* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1980), p. 48. Frankena, however, goes on to argue that: "[W]e must distinguish between moral goodness (virtue) and moral rightness, even though philosophers, theologians, and ordinary discourse

often use *right* and *good* interchangeably in moral contexts. Very roughly, actions are said to be morally right or obligatory, while other things are said to be morally good: intentions, motives, traits, and persons. It is true that actions are also said to be morally good, as in ‘That is (or was) a good deed.’ But a morally good action and a morally right one are not the same thing. Whether or not an action is morally good depends on its motive, but whether or not it is right depends on what it does; it is morally good if its motive is good, morally right if it does the right thing. Furthermore, one can do the right thing from a bad motive, or the wrong thing from a good motive.” However, I disagree with Frankena about much of this. It is true that ‘right’ applies (primarily at least) to *actions*, but it is not true that ‘good’ does *not* apply to actions (at least in the same sense). What Frankena is doing here is begging the issue about consequentialism, which will be discussed in Chapter 10, section 2.

⁸⁵ We can, of course, say something like “He’s the right man for the job.” In such a case we are saying that the man in question meets the standard or qualifications for what the job requires. But saying “He’s a right man.” is deviant. If we want to morally characterize the guy (as to how he generally thinks and acts in situations where moral decisions must be made), we have to say “He’s a good man.” instead.

⁸⁶ A primary meaning for the adjective ‘right’ in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th Ed. (1993), is “being in accordance with what is just, good, or proper (~ conduct)”. Further definitions given include “agreeable to a standard”, “correct”, and “conforming to facts or truth”. So that dictionary clearly recognizes the centrality of the concept of *meeting a standard* in the meaning of the word ‘right’.

⁸⁷ A more concise, dictionary style, definition of ‘right’ might be: “(of actions) in accordance with what is good, or is in the common, collective interests of the people”. But the definition I give in the text gives more explicit emphasis to the need for meeting a moral *standard* for the action.

⁸⁸ It is possible that the word ‘just’ also carries the implication of taking a more universal view of meeting *all* the possible standards for what answers to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole, whereas ‘right’ may be focused more on meeting the standards associated with answering to the common, collective interests of the people as a whole *with regard to the sort of specific activity being discussed*. But if so, this is perhaps a matter of connotation only.

I should note that in this discussion of moral terms (other than ‘good’ and ‘interests’) I am conscious that I am doing a somewhat superficial job; certainly my suggestions for the precise meanings of these terms should not be taken as definitive!

⁸⁹ In an orchestra, for example, the musicians are *obliged* to “more or less” follow the score and the directions of the conductor, not for legal or moral reasons, but because they have agreed to do so in order to generate the sort of music that the orchestra has come together in order to produce.

⁹⁰ *The American College Dictionary* (NY: Random House, 1964), gives as the first two definitions of ‘duty’ the following: “1. that which one is bound to do by moral or legal obligation, 2. the binding or obligatory force of that which is morally right; moral obligation”

⁹¹ *The American College Dictionary*, op. cit., gives these definitions for ‘ought’: “1. was (were) or am (is, are) bound in duty or moral obligation: *every citizen ought to help*, 2. was (am, etc.) bound or required on any ground, as of justice, propriety, probability, expediency, fitness, or the like (usually followed by an infinitive with *to* or having the infinitive omitted but understood): *he ought to be punished*”. *Webster’s Third International Dictionary (Unabridged)* puts it more concisely: Ought is “used to express moral obligation, duty, or necessity or what is correct, advisable, or expedient”, but this much fails to bring out just *how* the word is used to do these things.

⁹² There is a question, however, as to whether purely aesthetic interests are interests in the psychological sense (that is, related to wants, desires, likings, etc.) rather than objective, beneficial interests which are important in ethics. I will avoid getting into this issue at present.

⁹³ Paul Ziff, op. cit., pp. 219-220.

⁹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 143.

⁹⁵ I have a hypothesis to explain why Ziff didn't (or even didn't want to) draw a distinction between the psychological and objective (or beneficial) senses of the word 'interest'. Ziff was originally an artist, and got into philosophy as well because of his focus on aesthetics. That is, he wanted to really be able to rationally demonstrate why saying "This is a good painting" is correct or incorrect in specific cases. That led him to focus on the word 'good' and what it must mean, which in turn led him to focus on the word 'interest'. But in aesthetics, in particular, it is very much a matter of a person's psychology—what they like, or are concerned with, or are attending to, and so forth—that matters. There is therefore a strong motive to focus on psychological interests if you are talking about what the word 'good' means in art appreciation. On the other hand, in ethics, this is quite the wrong approach. I suspect that Ziff probably recognized the ambiguity in the word 'interest', but purposefully chose to ignore that because—for him—both senses were needed and appropriate for explicating the word 'good' in all its various uses (that is, not only in ethics, but also in aesthetics and ordinary day-to-day affairs).

⁹⁶ I am referring to the work of such academics as John Roemer, G. A. Cohen, Eric Olin Wright, Jon Elster, Robert Brenner, Adam Przeworski and numerous kindred spirits. I have not made a careful study of this school and cannot speak with much authority about their works. My initial impressions are negative, however. I should add that I have no objection to using some analytical techniques in Marxist philosophy, and in fact I am doing so to a degree myself in this very book.

⁹⁷ Eric Olin Wright, *Classes*, (NY: Verso, 1985), p. 36.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-9.

⁹⁹ A great many words generally have an implicit human-centered component to their meaning. I recently came across the example of the word 'catastrophe' being discussed in a history course on the topic of disasters and cataclysms which was taught by Rick Keller, a professor of medical history, at the University of Wisconsin. Keller remarked to someone writing an article about his course that "People have been studying disasters since there have been disasters. The approach is usually pretty clinical, but one of the things that's changed in recent years is a growing interest in the social dimensions of disasters." The magazine article then continues: "After all, Keller asks, can you have a catastrophe if a hurricane lands where there are no people or if a volcano blows its top when nobody's around? The disaster equation, it seems, requires the human variable." If we pose the question "If a volcano explodes and there's no one around to suffer, is it a catastrophe?" the appropriate answer is "No, it is not a catastrophe" because catastrophes (in the standard case at least) are things which greatly harm the welfare of *human beings*. ["Cataclysmic Class", *On Wisconsin* magazine, Winter 2007, pp. 16-17.]

¹⁰⁰ Melvin Rader, *Ethics and Society: An Appraisal of Social Ideals*, (NY: Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 155-6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰³ In case there may be some, Marxists or otherwise, who doubt this assertion, I refer them to Lenin's remark that "from the standpoint of the basic ideas of Marxism, the interests of social development are higher than the interests of the proletariat..." [LCW 4:236]. I discuss this remark further in section 7.3 where I show that it must mean in essence that the interests of the *people as a whole* (where such interests truly exist!) must take precedence over the interests of the working class, or any other section of the people.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated by Maurice Cranston, (NY: Penguin Books, 1983), Book II, Chapter 3, pp. 72-3. The words in brackets are in the original.

¹⁰⁵ Not even the extremely rare cases of hermits living alone in caves for years on end disproves this. Such people are mostly mentally disturbed. Even if they are not, they hardly can be taken to be normal, representative human beings. Furthermore, they were raised by society, even if they have abandoned it.

¹⁰⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Chapter I, sections IV and V, included in Mary Peter Mack, ed., *A Bentham Reader*, (NY: Pegasus, 1969), pp. 86-7.

¹⁰⁷ Those who recognize that Marx's thinking about ethics changed over time have somewhat different ideas as to how to characterize Marx's views in different periods. One author begins his book on this topic this way:

“I have entitled this book *Marx and Ethics* rather than *Marx's Ethics* because I do not think that Marx has a single ethical theory that he sticks to throughout all periods of his thought. In the early writings, Marx's ethics are based on a concept of essence much like Aristotle's which he tries to link to a concept of universalization much like that found in Kant's categorical imperative. In the *German Ideology*, Marx develops a doctrine of historical materialism, abandons these Kantian and Aristotelian elements, and indeed rejects the very possibility of ethics altogether. In the later writings, he revives an ethical theory which, however, is different from that of his early works.” [Philip Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, (Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.]

Personally, I think that Kain at least partially mischaracterizes Marx's ethical views for all three periods, and in particular mischaracterizes his intermediate and mature views—in part because he does not sufficiently focus on the centrality of *class interests*. But my purpose in this book is not to argue about what Marx thought, but rather to put forward and defend the MLM class-interest theory of ethics. Consequently I am trying to avoid getting bogged down in interminable arguments over Marxist exegesis.

¹⁰⁸ Marx and Engels, “The Holy Family” (1845), *MECW* 4:130-1.

¹⁰⁹ Brian Morton, “Chomsky Then and Now”, a review of two books by Noam Chomsky, *The Nation*, May 7, 1988, p. 652. Morton was an editor of the reformist, semi-Trotskyist journal *Dissent*.