

KARL MARX: A *BONA-FIDE* MORAL PHILOSOPHER OR A SOCIAL REFORMER?

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Introduction

The socio-political theory that Marx developed has substantial moral contents and pseudo moral principles; hence, his moral theory appears to be plausible and defensible. The metaphysical foundations of Marxist ethics are disjointed and scattered through his writings especially his political, economic and social theories. In many of his works, he does not identify moral principles primarily as moral theory but rather in an implicit sense. The ontological hub of Marxist morality rests robustly on four basic pillars: correct understanding of human nature as a natural being, adequate knowledge about man as a social being, true knowledge of humans as transformers of their environment and understanding of humans as transformers of themselves through activity and productivity. As Rodney G. Peffer encapsulates the background of Marxist morality, the moral perspective of Karl Marx is fundamentally projected through three primary moral values, “freedom (as self-determination), human community, and self-realization, as well as some sort of principle demanding an egalitarian distribution of these goods, at least, the good of freedom.”¹ As a matter of fact, we clearly see that Marxist moral evaluations are almost exclusively implicit and packaged into concepts like “alienation’...as well as value-laden terms as ‘impoverishment’,...well-being, ‘debasement’, ‘degradation’, ‘domination’, ‘freedom’, ‘enjoyment’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘servitude’,... ‘inhuman’ etc.”² A cursory look at Marxist various writings show that the moral values in the above quotation are

not thoroughly developed and applied to his moral theory in a primary sense but rather in a supplementary style. Therefore, Marxist morality could be considered as hybridity of Hegelian moral idealism and Kantian moral transcendental choice and will power. This is evident in his commitment to the value of human community as previously divided and isolated but will come together in communism where individual is anticipated to freely and amicably co-operate with others to control human productivity.

This paper is out to explore how Karl Marx implores moral terms and principles to determine the fundamental structures on which his moral theory of social justice can be established. The paper briefly gives a description of three relevance forms of political society as a preamble to Marxist social theory: capitalism, socialism and communism with their economic implications for the people in a given society. This is followed by the opposition of Marx to the ethical principles that established and preserved either capitalism or socialism. The essay examines the basic characteristics of Marxist self-styled ethical theory before it offers a general evaluation. A conclusion is drawn from the essay to show that Karl Marx is more of a social reformer than a *bona fide* moral philosopher. The methods employed in this paper are expository, analytical and evaluative.

Clarification of terms

It is pertinent to define and look into the meaning of some relevant terms like capitalism, socialism and communism associated with the moral-cum-socio-political philosophy of Karl Marx. They are considered to be remarkable backgrounds to his writings. While the meaning and relevance of some other ones like alienation, ideology, rich individuality, bourgeois, proletariat, self-realization and a host of others are located somehow and somewhere in the later part of this essay.

Capitalism Defined

The term capitalism is described as an economic and political system designed to allow the control of trade, industries and means of production to be in the hands of private individuals and corporate organizations to generate profit. A capitalist political economy is characterised by ownership of private property, capital accumulation by an individual or corporate groups, competitive markets and wage-labour relationship in various models. There are four identified varieties of capitalism namely, oligarchic capitalism, state guided capitalism, big firm capitalism and entrepreneurial capitalism.³ The common characteristic among these four brands of capitalism is that

they respect the right of individual owning property in different proportions. The fundamental difference among them is evident in how each commendably boosts economic growth and development. Oligarchic capitalism is well pronounced in many countries of Latin America, Africa and Middle East where political and economic policies are designed to promote the interest of the few people that belong to the ruling class. State guided capitalism is persistently responsible for the demands of market forces as obvious when government's erroneous policy leads to economic crisis in a given society as evident in Greece. Big capitalism is substantially apparent when big companies refused to respond to new changes and innovations that emerged in the society. This is very common in Europe and Japan where there are dominant corporations and companies exercising substantial influence in the political and economy policies of the government of the day.⁴ Entrepreneurial capitalism is described as the best among the four varieties of capitalism because it encourages new creativities in technology as palpable in the United States of America where young companies are promoting mass productions of new technologies into inexpensive and valuable products for consumers.

The Meaning of Socialism

The word socialism is etymologically derived from the Latin word *sociare* meaning to combine and share together. But Merriam-Webster, an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Company defines socialism as “a way of organizing a society in which major industries are owned and controlled by the government rather than individual people and companies.”⁵ Generally speaking, socialism is any form of political theories that promote collective ownership and management of production and distribution of available resources in the state to every citizen. As a matter of fact, the history and meaning of socialism is incomplete without reference to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. The word socialism was first used in the history of French civilization to illustrate the common view of Charles Fourier, Henri De Saint-Simon and Robert Owen on the common welfare of everyone in the society.⁶ The essence of their socialist theory is located in their support for non-coercive communities of people living and working together for the good of all in the society without rivalry. The former USSR, Russia was cited as a typical example of a socialist state. The theory of socialism was generated to challenge the abuse of individualism that made acting and living in isolation from others in the society attractive. Hence, socialism has synonyms like welfarism, communism and social democracy.

Delineation of Communism

The word communism is derived from a French word, *commun*, that is, common. By definition, communism is a variant of political theory propounded by Karl Marx to justify the need for the proletarians to struggle against the selfish interests of the bourgeois. This struggle is necessary so as to achieve a community in which all the available property and means of productions are owned by the community and each member of the community works according to his abilities and paid or catered for respectively. It is a socio-political and economic ideology established on the basis of communal ownership of property in a classless and coercion-less society. In Marxist socio-economic theory, communism is described as the final historical or omega point of evolutionary process of human socio-economic relationship. This supposes a society with abundance of resources and spontaneous willingness of members of the society to guide the use of the benefits accrue from the means of production judiciously. In V.C. Wills opinion, "Marx justifies communism precisely on the grounds that it would permit, for the first time in human history, the full and free development of individual personalities, providing a material and economic basis that would allow persons to pursue creative endeavours and develop an array of talents and capacities determined by their own unique interests."⁷ As a result of this, Karl Marx defines and promotes the impression that "communism as a fully developed naturalism is humanism and as a fully developed humanism is naturalism."⁸ Here one can see that Marx is trying to show that the strict practice of communism resolves the conflict between man and man as well as between nature and humanity. In other words, the resolution will bring about the appropriate relationship between human existence and essence as well as elimination of any form of alienation between man and his productivity. One can easily infer from this perspective that, "Marx's vision of communism is of a society that has transcended morality. Such a society is not only impracticable but inconceivable since social and moral conflict requiring the arbitration of ethical rules will be an invariant feature of any human community however saintly one assumes its individuals to have become."⁹ Hence, Marxist moral evaluation and recommendations between 1858 and 1883 are perspicuously meant to establish and promote communism. Now that we have surveyed the types of society that Marx observed and condemned in the past vis-à-vis his ideal society, there is need for us to examine the influence of Aristotle on his purported ethical theory.

Influence of Aristotle on Karl Marx

There is a clear indication that Marxist moral theory is a mixed deontological variant of consequential morality as evident in the moral

theory of John Rawls and W.K. Frankena.¹⁰ He is not purely utilitarian like Jeremy Bentham, not moral philosopher of rational will-power like Kant and not pleasure oriented hedonist like Epicurus but his moral orientation is similar to Aristotelian understanding of the human nature with inherent values of dignity, choice of action and remarkable relationship that exists between human beings and their environment. As Rodney Peffer wittily posits:

His moral theory is a mixed deontological theory, a theory of right action or obligation that recommends the promotion of one or more types of non-moral good (like freedom, human community, and self-realization in Marx's case) but holds that the criterion of right action is not simply the maximization of the non-moral good...but treating people as ends in themselves or treating people fairly or respecting people's rights.¹¹

This implies that Marx sturdily accentuates the fact that “those actions that maximise some specified non-moral good are not merely morally good but morally right in the sense that one has a moral obligation to support and promote them.”¹² If this claim is incontrovertible, it means that Aristotle is somehow a moral pacesetter for Marx as notable in Aristotelean emphasis on intrinsic non-moral good of self-expression, human dignity, deliberative choice of action and civility. Nevertheless, they are completely differed when it comes to the issue of equality among human beings.¹³ Aristotle recognises the fact that equality is subject to some basic variables. For instance, the proportionality of the attainment of individual's perfection in the society deserves correspondent social goods and rights to live a reasonable and comfortable life. This implies that Aristotle supports classed society while Marx insistently advocates for a classless or strict egalitarian society. Moreover, it is observable that the duo are concerned with human activity and self-realization; however, Marx is not a perfectionist like Aristotle that wants the development of the highest human capacities to the highest possible level without any consideration for its consequential effects.

In this context, the demand for human freedom and equality could be positive or negative in nature. According to Rodney G. Peffer, It is negative “when freedom must be interpreted as the demand for a maximum system of equal liberties. The demand for positive freedom must be interpreted as including both the right to equal participation in all social decision-making processes that affect one's life and the right of equal access to the means of self-realization”.¹⁴ What is unambiguous from the view of Marx concerning equality is that every member of a society must treated equally in all social ramifications and anything fall

short of this standard is detestable. We have explored Marxist understanding of the models of socio-political structures of his time and the areas of convergences and divergences in his relationship with Aristotelian ethics, therefore it is necessary to discern Marxist objections to the ethical theories that determine the moral perspective of his days. This attempt will expose us to the nitty-gritty of his social reformation and how he employs moral terms and principles to establish his arguments and justification.

Marxist objections to Dominant Ethical Theories of his time

Marx has a great repugnance against the foremost ethical theories like Christian morality, moral Kantianism and utilitarianism that hold sway before he formulates his socio-political and ethical theories. In Marxist opinion, objections against any of them are centred on the fact that each of them is rooted in what he describes as erroneous conception of human nature with inherent relationships and implications. In her interpretation of Marx, V.C. Wills says:

Christianity...sees the realization of human essence not in man's rational, conscious and purposive interactions with the natural and social world, aimed at the development of his own powers as an end. Rather, it encourages human beings to turn away from the world and to sacrifice. It gives expression to the alienation that human beings experience, but defers the hope for an abolition of human alienation to the world beyond...not as a task for humans, but as a task for a supernatural being.¹⁵

Judging from this quotation, Marx evaluates Christian morality as what David Hume describes as 'Monkish' morality and for him an ethics of servility. This is a kind of morality in which people are required to deny themselves of certain needs and freedom for the sake of heaven. As far as Marx is concerned such morality goes contrary to human nature that opens to constant development and self-fulfilment. As a result of this observation, Marx opposes Christian morality with passion and considers religion as 'opium' designed by the rich for the poor workers to be able to manipulate and alienate them from their potentialities in the world.

Again, Marxist disgust for Christian morality steps also from the fact that the root of the morality is traceable to God, an authority he considers as external and unaware of the existential realities surrounding human existence. He objects to every standard of morality that is described as eternal, immutable and fixed because such terms are opposed to the changes associated with human experiences in the

world. The Marxist rational justification against fixed and eternal realities like truth and goodness to be the foundation of morality is that “human social being is constantly changing and developing, that the fact of the matter about what is good or bad for human beings at various historical stages changes and develops as well.”¹⁶ If Marxist's claim is unambiguous, it means that ethical terms and principles for human beings to live well in the society need constant revision and reconstruction and interpretation to avoid any moral principles capable of alienating them from their natural endowment.

The view of Marx about Kantian morality is that the basis of Kantian free-will that cannot recognise inability of human beings to form their will freely without the influence of the existential realities inherent in the historical background of their lives is untenable. As a matter of emphasis, it is strongly admitted in Marxist tradition that “Kant leaves wide open the gap between what 'is' and what 'ought' to be, arguing that the total conformity of individuals' wills with the moral law can only be realized in the kingdom of ends, a condition which Kant argues cannot be realized in the material world.”¹⁷ This variant of morality becomes unacceptable to Marx because the moral principles embedded in it constitute a remarkable alienation between human beings and the abilities nature endowed them for self-realization and transformation of the universe.

The cornerstone of utilitarianism is based on the fact that a moral action is good and acceptable provided it maximises its usefulness for the majority of the people that exist in a given society. In his rejection of this moral theory, we clearly read from Wills that, “utilitarianism obliterates the unique aspects of different products and different relations between people and reduces them to one thing: utility, or usefulness”.¹⁸ Marx wants us to understand the fact that the strict principles of utilitarianism brings about a misleading meaning of social relationships among human beings. In other words, social concern for one another in society must not be limited only to what is immediately useful; rather it must encompass all that promotes both immediate and future realization of human fulfilment. As one can infer from Marxist ethics, it is the distortion in the understanding of social relationship embedded in human nature that leads to the theory of capitalism and its inconsiderate practices.

Marxist Description of Capitalism as Immorality

This paper at the beginning highlighted the meaning and the practices that characterised the theory of capitalism. What is immoral in capitalism in the worldview of Marx is encapsulated in the fact that capitalism in all ramifications stimulates factors that lead to division in

the quality and fulfilment of human life in the society, alienates the poor workers from the benefits that can turn them to 'rich individuals' or 'species-beings'. As Wills describes Marxist characteristics of capitalism, it "produces persons who act, not as what Marx calls species-beings, individuals who act under a conception of themselves and their fellows as members of one species with needs and conditions for flourishing that belong to the species, but rather as atomized, egoistic competitors who act only out of the most immediate and narrow self-interest."¹⁹ As a matter of fact, Marxist revulsion of capitalism is located in the evidence that capitalist morality is specifically intended to preserve bourgeois rule with socio-political and economic *status quo* that limits the self-realisation of proletarians in the society. Marx considers this capitalism system of government as immoral and abhorrent because the moral practices involved stifles the realization of the potencies inherent in human nature. As one can clearly reads from Wills, "Marx argues that under capitalism, human beings are alienated from their essence as social beings who produce their own existence through labour. Nearly all of man's works take on an independent and hostile character that overpowers him, so that instead of human beings mastering their products, they are mastered by them."²⁰ This implies that human beings become the slaves of their potencies because of selfish and inaccurate interpretation of the meaning of human nature by the capitalists.

Despite the fact that capitalists would not allow a change in the *status quo*, Marx is very confident that the social ills like alienation and class struggle generated by the capitalist society is limited to a historical perspective and can be abolished and replaced with communism where every individual can achieved their existential goals through their productivity. Here we can see the source of the impulse that fires the desire of Marx to discard the existing moral theories that are antisocial and generates a different one that can enhance human self-realization, freedom and control of their means of production. As a way of corroboration, "the abolition of that alienation, and the achievement of building a society in which human beings can consciously and rationally pursue their own development as an end, is the highest moral aim for Marx and forms the basis of his critiques and arguments for communism."²¹ There is no doubt that Marx has defined, determined and justified his reasons for opposing the moral theories existing in the society of his time. Let us now examine the characteristics of his supposed moral theory before we can evaluate its credibility. Prior to the exploration of the characteristics of Marxist moral theory, it is important to describe his understanding of human nature and its relationship to his morality.

Marxist Concept of Human Nature and Its Relevance to Morality

Generally speaking, Marx teaches that human beings are biological beings that belong to a distinct species among the genus of mammals. They are natural beings with different composition and metabolic processes that nature has endowed them through the process and history of evolution. As a way of sustaining their biological and chemical make-up, they require material needs like food, shelter, clothes and good water. Besides, they also need environment that promotes their dignity, freedom of choosing a befitting practical life and realization of the potencies inherent in their nature. As a matter of fact, the second category of their needs set them apart from other animals. According to Marx, the natural distinction between men and other animals becomes noticeable immediately “men themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”²² This is how human beings become transformers of their lives and their environment. However, where all these potentialities in human nature are not allowed to manifest, alienation is bound to take a firm root in the consciousness of the people. As G. Peffer speculates “one is alienated when one's essential human capacities are blocked or thwarted, when those potentialities that must be fulfilled for human wholeness, health and happiness go unfulfilled. The system of private property and profit alienates human beings because it thwarts the fulfilment of these two essential human capacities.”²³ As Marx would say, a good inference from this quotation shows that one does not need to go into any speculation before he can concretely conclude what constitutes moral and immoral action in a society. Thus, all that promotes the realization of the essential capacities of human beings is moral and the ones that inhibit the attainment of such good becomes immoral.

By this justification, nature helps human beings to be dynamic and continuously developing themselves and their environment in various ways. This implies that as men are acting on the external world and changing their environment, they are simultaneously changing their nature in the same world. As a matter of fact, social production of human beings determines their consciousness and existence in the world. Therefore, Marx strongly underlines the fact that human nature is the potency that determines the historical, socio-political, cultural, moral, religious and economic direction of a particular society at a given time. As V.C. Wills sharply subscribes, “whenever Marx evaluates the moral status of an economic formation, a political system, the role of a

group or collective, or the specific actions of one individual person, he does so within the context of this more abstract and universal conception of human social existence.”²⁴ In Marxist disposition as well as apparent in J. Rousseau and Hegel, a man truly becomes human as soon as he consciously possesses the capacity to freely transform the natural world with the use of his hands and mind in productive activity. It is by this fact that human beings can develop themselves. Here we see that Marx identifies and underlines self-realization as the centre of his moral thinking. In other words, Marx is concerned about the immediate needs and welfare of workers in the society rather than permanent moral solution to the challenges of morality in human nature. This implies that any attempt to provide a fixed and immutable moral principles automatically limits the benefits of historical materialism for human life in the society. Moreover, it would also reduce humans to slaves of a determined morality, economic system, political structure and scientific theory. This type of morality, politics, science, culture and economy is diametrically opposed to human nature that is continuously and historically open for change and creativity for maximizing the opportunity of human beings to transform their world and lives accordingly.

Marxist concept of a good society is based on the development of man in all ramifications; it is not limited to the fulfilment of individual's duty and self-interest. Hence, his own moral philosophy is different from the morality defined and advocated by J. Locke, Jeremy Bentham and J. Stuart Mill. It is obvious that his moral disposition tends towards Aristotelian ethics; a moral philosophy that its hub is located in the development of all necessary potentialities of the whole person. However, the key concern of Marx is not tied to how best to nurture human prosperity within the frontiers of a given sociological spectrum but within an adequate society that can permit human beings to flourish. In the opinion of Denis and Peterfrunt, “human beings fulfil themselves (acquire a sense of identity, pride, and direction) through meaningful work.”²⁵ This is possible only in a society where labourers are associated with their productivity as an expression of their ideas. As a matter of emphasis, this fulfilment can be achieved only under social conditions in which workers are intimately related to their creations, in the sense that the products are the fulfilment of their own ideas and objectives.

A closer look at the above claims of Marx shows that he rejects socio-political mechanism like capitalism that limits rational control of human production and benefits that accrue from it. His aversion for such social organisation serves as the foundation for his social

reformation with the use of historical processes and application of moral terms and principles to justify his invented ethical theory. As evident in the thesis of Wills, “he [Marx] morally evaluates social systems, theories, and human actions with respect to whether they promote or inhibit the increase of human beings' rational control over their own environment and social development, and the historical emergence of rich individuals.”²⁶ Here we can see that Marx holds strongly to the fact that man is actually a being that is meant for the production of rich individuals as the highest aim for human beings. In his opinion, the highest aim for human beings is possible in a society where human beings and their flourishing become ultimate guiding principle, where society's resources and productive capacities are judiciously and democratically controlled by the masses; and where society's resources are directed toward the fulfilment of human needs and the development of human powers and creativity. At this juncture, there is need for us to discover the basic characteristics of Marxist perceived moral theory under some terms that are valuable to him.

Marxist Ethical Theory and Opposition to Alienation

In Marxist conviction, human beings are alienated from the natural world and from their own species under capitalism because their needs as natural and social beings are limited to the barest minimum for survival. As Wills creatively puts it, “even the most simple basic aim of human beings to safeguard their continued survival is thwarted by social arrangements that inhibit the ability of humans to act rationally and effectively in accordance with that goal.”²⁷ It is evident that human nature has a complex activity that is dynamic and persistently unfolding its potentialities in various ways and capacities. The purposeful existence of human beings is the essential characteristic that set their lives apart from other form of life. Any attempt to distort this reality and thwart the realization of the benefits that can flow from this nature of man constitute the basis of alienation that Marx continuously opposed in his social, economic, political and ethical theories. Hence, alienation in its most basic form, is a condition in which human existence takes on a character that is at odds with human nature. Otherwise put, in alienation, human appearance is not reconciled with human resources”.²⁸ Marx insistently opposes this apparent contradiction on which alienation thrives in a capitalist society.

In Marxist understanding of human nature, Human beings as natural, social and historical beings use labour and creativity to “intervene consciously and purposely into their environments in order to satisfy their natural needs and in so doing, transform both their environments and themselves... They produce themselves not merely as natural, but

also as social beings ['species beings'].²⁹ This is an evidence that human beings have the rational power to determine their appreciated socio-political and ethical values by which they can attain happiness and fulfilment in the society. In a situation where alienation is strongly expressive, "human beings' products: material, social and intellectual, take on a foreign and hostile character...instead of furthering human aims, in alienation, human aims are thwarted by their own products".³⁰ A deduction from this quotation creates an impression that the criterion for what is moral in Marxism is that the guiding principles in the society "must help human beings to realize their nature as natural and social beings who satisfy their needs and transform their existence consciously through the labour process."³¹ The method employed by Marx to determine what is moral or immoral at a particular time in a given society is scientific because the existential realities surrounding human beings can be evaluated to determine if they alienate them from the potentialities abound in their nature or not. The Marxist meaning of rich individuality is succinctly becomes manifest in a situation by which what he considers as the moral (human ability to control and determine the values of practical life) is evidential in the moral ought (rational control of the means of attaining the moral goods inherent in human nature). As a matter of fact, rich individuals become human beings in whom the potentialities embedded in their nature are fully realized in a society where natural world and social implications for human needs are reconciled under their rational control. This implies that rich individuality is realizable only in a society that frown at alienation and promotes conditions that help human beings to attain their social ends in life.

Marx and Identified Source of Moral Principles and Obedience

Marx insistently maintained that the source of moral principles and obligation to obey ontologically and necessarily located in the autonomous deliberative choice of man and not from any external authority. As Peffer avows "the choice of moral principles must be made on the basis of one's own rational reflection and must not be subordinated to any outer authority."³² The justification of Marx against the classical foundation of morality stems from the fact that "moral ideas and standards, though falsely believed by traditional moral philosophers to be products of pure reason, are also conditioned by the material (economic) conditions of life."³³ Marx avers tirelessly that moral ideals and principles are determine by the existential realities and evidential implications in the society and not pure reason as Kant would say or God as apparent in Christian morality. Hence, Marx never compromise the fact that any form of religion is a product of human mind devised by the rich as a tool for cheating the working class.

Moreover, the moral principles derived from such instrument is meant to sustain class division, means of production and political power in the society. Marx is optimistic that the abolition of socio-economic classes will make such moral principles unnecessary in the society as a way of preparing ground for his theory of communism.³⁴

Marx and Necessity of Morality as an Ideology

In general term, ideology is a set of beliefs, doctrines and principles by which an individual or interest group defines, determines, directs and defends cherished view and idea. There are two types of ideology, the global and non-global ideology. Global Ideology is described as a disposition towards a particular idea that serves as the ontological foundation of the mechanism that forms the worldview of an individual or a group of people. In most cases, an individual or group that believes in an ideology always dedicates appreciable time, energy, intelligence and material resources to establish and promote the esteemed ideology as evident in the promotion of socialism, capitalism, liberalism, communism, militarism and totalitarianism. As a matter of fact, "Marx shows that the proletariat must develop its own ideology to theorize social contradictions and determine how they can be overcome to allow for a conscious, democratic and rational control over human beings' social existence."³⁵ Thus, the proletarians have the responsibility to determine and change their destiny in the society. In contrary, non-global ideology is defined as ideological values, judgments and principles that needs to be eliminated from one's theory and worldview to preserve its credibility. As Peffer neatly puts it, "a bewildering number of different characteristics are attributed to [non-global] ideology, all of which supposedly account for the fact that every X that is ideological is, *ipso facto*, somehow illegitimate and ought to be eliminated from or not admitted to one's theory or worldview."³⁶ Non-global ideology implies that all moral principles, judgments, theories and codes are to be jettisoned from Marxist worldview because they are not originally applicable to his moral theory. Here we can see clearly a kind of paradox in Marxist ethics. The different between global and non-global ideology rest firmly on two pillars: the global ideology covers a wider horizon than the non-global ideology and the global ideology is often employed to describe positive evidential social realities while non-global ideology becomes a negative evaluative description of the same realities.³⁷ Therefore, if Marxist morality is ideological it implies that Marxist condemnation of capitalism as socio-economic structure that limits human freedom, self-actualization and egalitarian society with credible solidarity becomes none and void. Moreover, the Marxist projection of the potentialities inherent in socialism and communism automatically becomes a mere perfunctory or

mechanical. The interpretation of Marxist morality as ideological invariably implies negatively that his moral theory is systematically misleading, socially supernatural and upholding the *status quo*, promoting the interest of the ruling class.

Nevertheless, Marxist morality as an ideology positively makes the theory function as an instrument to fight the factors working against human freedom, self-actualization, control of human productivity and general well-being of human beings in a particular historical time. As a matter of urgency, these factors are to be eliminated because they provide fertile ground for the principles of capitalism to thrive progressively at the expense of the growth and development of proletarians. At the end, we observe that the intention of Marx to describe morality as an ideology is not meant to disparage the term but to demonstrate the fact that morality is equally a historical reality like religion produced by human beings to empirically determine the activity and conditions for their flourishing in the world.³⁸ This implies that what is actually moral for Marx is whatever that enhances the wholesome development and well-being of every human being. In other words, material and socio-political realities determine moral principles and not universal principles like do good and avoid evil.

Marx and Relevance of History to Morality

Marx demonstrates the fact that man is dynamic and always in the process of becoming the best he could be in the society. There is always historical account of the activities that paved way for his self-actualization in a given society. It is apparent that history often reminds human beings about the existential realities available in their environment and how relevant they are for moral evaluation at a specific time. Hence, what is moral within this decade or century may become immoral at another time and vice-versa. In her interpretation of Marx, Wills maintains that, "in seeking to determine what is morally right or wrong in a given situation, we must gather as much information as possible regarding moments of the concrete totality of social existence in which one acts. In short, a scientific materialist knowledge of human social existence is a prerequisite for accurate normative judgments."³⁹ It is indubitable in the opinion of Marx that the Marxist morality is systematically historical, therefore the details of the issues concerning what is moral or immoral are not static but rather flow from the historical context of a particular time. In Marxism, morality is historical in two senses:

the first is that the validity of specific moral commands and specific moral theories depends, not on some set of eternal truths, but rather on human social

development and the question of which things will promote human development at a particular point in human history. Morality is also historical in the sense that morality is a social product that has arisen at a particular stage in human history and...will also pass away when the gap between human existence as it is and human existence as it ought to be is closed.⁴⁰

Therefore, Marxist ethics depends on historical and existential realities of human life because morality emerges as a social product at a given time and capable of metamorphosis until the difference between what is morally is and morally ought is reconciled.⁴¹ What is morally good is what contributes to the progress, comfort and well-being of man at a given time and vice versa. A second look at the acclaimed of Marxist ethics shows that Marx makes effort to demonstrate that his ethical theory is universalizable in as much as the principles inherent therein are projected for every human species. In her interpretation of Marx on this claim, Wills purposely maintains that, "if a moral theory is incapable of making universal claims upon human beings, regardless of their cognitive states or subjective group identifications, then it hardly merits being called a moral theory at all." The revolutionary move of Marx in this context is meant to provide moral principles and incorporated them into an ideology that will flush away all elements of capitalism and socialism so that communism can be enthroned in the world. In the opinion of Marx, the success of this remarkable revolt will not be limited to the workers alone but to all human species as a whole. This idea of Marx seems to be bogus and utopic because human beings are more complicated to have a reliable projection about their needs and means of attaining them. We know that this paper has been evaluative form the beginning but a general appraisal of the whole write up is required.

Evaluation

Marxist ethics is an offshoot of his understanding of economics, philosophy, theology, politics and history that characterized his society. Marx believes strongly that everything in the universe is in a state of relentless change including human society, appreciated cultural values and moral principles. Besides, he recognises the fact that there are two major classes in the society, the bourgeoisie and the Proletarians. He underscores the fact that the duo are having moral principles that are absolutely opposed to each other. His moral theory is designed to enhance the proletarians to develop moral disposition that is totally contrary to the interest and morality of the bourgeoisie. Marx is not preoccupy with the way human beings ought to behave in the society

like many of the moral philosophers that hold sway before him; but rather how people should behave to have a new society. As a matter of fact, the moral concerns of scholars like D. Hume, E. Kant and J.S. Mill were considered irrelevancies for Marx. According to a German sociologist, Werner Sombart, Marxism is set apart from all other socialist systems by its anti-ethical inclination. He observes that from the beginning to the end, there is no grain of ethics, no ethical judgment or ethical theory in the writings of Marx.⁴² What is evident is the way he uses moral terms and principles to justify the need for a communist society.

In our exploration of Marxism, we discovered that Marx does not actually have a specific systematic work on morality. However, there are many writings he left behind for interested researchers to form a body of his moral theory. Needless to say there are many indecisive numbers of moral interpretations, reconstructions and replete implications in the *corpus* of his works. Marxist ethical theory is merely a theory of social justice rather than full fledged ethical theory because its principal components [self-determination, human community, self-realization with equal distribution of freedom to all and sundry] are basically meant to establish and promote social justice and harmony in the society. Karl Marx rejects the morality defined, determined and promoted by classical philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas because such morality depends on assumed eternal realities like God and erroneous human nature for its foundation. He believes that such morality is established to preserve and promote the interest of the exploiting class at the expense of the working class. He emphasizes the fact that Christian doctrines are employed by the rich to mystify moral terms and realities to subdue the freedom and creativity of the exploited class. Hence, Marx believes that a just society is possible only when there is a classless society and equal distribution of the available resources and freedom in the society. As a matter of fact, appropriate morality for a classless society depends on the necessary changes and history of the time.

In his opinion, he identifies revolution as the only instrument for eliminating the class differences before a classless society can be attained and such action is indisputably moral and encouraged. Marx strongly insists that, any means employ to overthrow the rich from controlling the resources of the society by the working class is considered moral, permissible and defensible. As a matter of necessity, it should be a duty for everyone that wants to oppose all factors that limit human freedom, equality, self-actualization and control of productivity by every member of a classless society. Marxist ethics is

encircled with many uncertainties. For instance, Marx suggests the need to develop a new morality for a classless society but he cannot give a categorical description of adequate moral terms and principles for such a society because the historical and existential realities that would surround such a unique society are yet unknown. Despite the fact that Marxist moral theory implicitly contained some moral principles and judgments, some scholars like Karl Popper and G. Peffer considered his moral theory null and void and therefore insignificant. In this context, what intellectuals like Peffer viewed as problem with his use of moral values and principles is that some unexpected factors inherent in a future society like communism may render the basis of his appreciated moral values and principles ineffective. The fact that Marxist moral theory is limited to a historical perspective that is base specifically on matter of fact rather than logical truth makes his esteemed moral values, principles and judgments subjective, changeable, historical and not purely philosophical.

The fact that Marx does not bother to present an explicit moral theory accessible and acceptable by all does not negate the reality of moral validity in his ethical theory. This is because his condemnation of a social system on the basis that such social structure “starves, enslaves and alienates people...frustrates human self-actualization, prosperity and other non-moral goods [pleasure, happiness and freedom]”⁴³ implies that Marxist moral principles and normative judgments are derived from a particular class of moral theory. It is a morality that is out to resolve socio-political and economic conflicts in a given society because of its emphasis on human freedom, self-actualization, equal distribution of the social goods, and mutual co-operation with others in the society. The moral ideals that Marx generated and promoted are sourced from these aforementioned factors. Therefore, it is indisputable that the moral principles in Marxist ethics has prescriptive and universality that is based on consideration for human intrinsic good. Hence, Marxist ethics contains some practicable elements of morality.

Nevertheless, the moral values like freedom, communal life, self-realization and judgments based on egalitarian distribution of social goods in Marxist moral theory are historically justified as moral because they are the nitty-gritty of his socio-political theory, the oil that can service the mechanism of communism. As evident in his writings, Marx articulates arguments to historically illustrate what is wrong with capitalism and justifies how and when communism will take over social structures and economy from the capitalism that has alienated human beings from their nature, productivity and creativity.

Conclusion

The hub of Marxist alleged moral theory is located in the way alienation can be eliminated in the society so that human beings can realize the goods that are inherent in their nature for them to become rich human beings. Marx believes that the attainment of this status will enhance human beings to have rational control of their means of production as well as to govern legitimately their natural and social environments. By implication, the concern of Marx is about concrete and practical moral goods and not any form of abstract good. What Marx wants us to understand is that all that is morally desirable in human life must have the features of what promotes human consciousness, welfare and eliminates the oppression of man to man in the society. He believes passionately that the development of a rich individual is possible in a communist society where the gap between what is morally is and what is morally ought would have been subsumed. Therefore, Marx is a philosopher of different extraction that we can easily identify as an existentialist or humanist moral philosopher. Without mincing words, Karl Marx is simply more of a social reformer than a moral philosopher.

End Notes

¹ Rodney G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 115.

² *Ibid*, p. 47.

³ Wikipedia: capitalism, sighted 12th of August, 2015.

⁴ www.acton.org-volume_17-number-4, sighted 12th of August, 2015.

⁵ www.merriam-webster, sighted on the 27th of July, 2015.

⁶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/socialism

⁷ V. C. Wills, *Marx and Morality*, doctoral dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pittsburg, 2011, p. 40.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Economics and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 55.

⁹ Steven Lukes,
<http://newleftreview.org/static/assets/archive/pdf/NLR15907.pdf>

¹⁰ Rodney G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, p. 84.

¹¹ Rodney G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, p. 81.

¹² *Ibid*. p. 82.

¹³ *Ibid*. p. 107.

¹⁴ Rodney G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, p. 115.

¹⁵ V.C. Wills, p. 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid*. p. 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p, 96.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 102

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 245

²¹ Ibid. p. 245.

²² Karl Marx, *German Ideology*, MECW, 1931, p. 5.

²³ R.G. Peffer, p. 53.

²⁴ Ibid. p.14.

²⁵ Denis and Peterfrunf, p. 221.

²⁶ V. C. Wills, *Marx and Morality*, p. iv.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 25.

²⁸ Ibid. p.61.

²⁹ Ibid. p.70.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 62.

³¹ V.C. Wills, p. 14.

³² R.G. Peffer, p. 37.

³³ T.C. Denise and S.P. Peterfreund, *Great Traditions in Ethics*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988, p. 220.

³⁴ Denise and peterfrunf, p. 230.

³⁵ R.G. Peffer, pp. iv-v.

³⁶ R.G. Peffer, p. 236.

³⁷ R.G. Peffer, p. 239.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 9.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 16.

⁴⁰ V.C Wills, p. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 30.

⁴² <https://www.marxists.org>, visited on the 19th of August, 2015.

R.G. Peffer, p. 183.