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BOOK REVIEW

Marx's Ethical Vision

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Karen Ng

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Correspondence: Karen Ng (karen.ng@vanderbilt.edu)

In the midst of a new wave of Marx scholarship, Vanessa Wills' *Marx's Ethical Vision* stands out in a number of striking ways. First, as her title suggests, she defends the claim that Marx had a thoroughgoing, unified, and coherent ethical perspective, one developed in his writings over the course of his life. Although the book is organized around different key themes, including ideology, alienation, individuality, freedom, and determinism, the centerpiece of Wills' account of Marx's ethics revolves around an interpretation of historical materialism and how our essential human nature develops over time. Second, Wills' interpretation goes against the longstanding orthodoxy established by analytical Marxism of reading Marx *without* Hegel, and especially the so-called baggage of holistic, dialectical thinking. Wills not only argues that the latter are essential for understanding Marx, but also introduces a position she calls "dialectical compatibilism" to defend the theory of historical materialism. Third, and in a way that is uncommon even for sympathetic readers of Marx, Wills defends unmitigated, unvarnished versions of some of Marx's most controversial claims, and almost entirely on Marx's own terms. This is a surprising, refreshing approach, not overly bogged down by either the reception history of Marx or the history of actually existing communism. Wills accomplishes this while also engaging with a large swath of Marx's interpreters from many different traditions, from the aforementioned analytical Marxists to Austromarxists and Western Marxists, without excluding contemporary scholarship on Marx and beyond in Anglophone philosophy. This is an unapologetic, deeply informed, philosophical defense of the totality of Marx's thinking, read through an ethical lens.

Without being able to do justice to the wide range of topics taken up in the book, I offer a few highlights before presenting some resistance to a central thesis concerning the abolition of morality. Against many prevailing accounts, Wills begins by defending a notion of ideology that is not simply pejorative, arguing that ideology has a positive, indispensable role to play in a revolutionary project aiming to overturn capitalism. She argues that, for Marx, ideological thinking is endemic to class societies as such. It is thus important that proletarian ideology acts as a counter to bourgeois ideology, and that the former can be a force for enlisting the bourgeoisie to join the proletarian cause. For Wills, then, ideology is not best understood as a form of false consciousness, but "as an attempt to grapple with the conflicts between the relations of production and the forces of production" (p. 22). In addition, against longstanding and continuing anti-humanist trends, Wills defends an account of essential human nature as the foundation of Marx's ethical thought and identifies human nature with the labor process. In returning to this traditional foundation of Marxist thinking, Wills takes a historical, developmental approach in which human nature is both "dynamic" and "thin" (pp. 52, 54). Human beings realize their essential nature as productive beings within material, biological, social, and historical constraints, constraints that at once create possibilities for expanding their powers of self-determination—a thesis she calls "dialectical compatibilism." In Wills' interpretation, the realization of essential human nature—and negatively, the abolition of alienation—is "the highest ethical ideal for Marx" (p. 74). Alongside this, Wills also suggests that Marx develops an account of rich individuality in contrast to existing notions of bourgeois individuality that "function as a standard for the ethical evaluation of people, actions, and circumstances" (p. 121). Marx's ethical vision is one that revolves around a historical materialist understanding of human activity and its development, where ethical ideals and evaluative standards all stem from human beings and their productive activity alone.

As should be evident, Wills' approach to Marx's ethics is unapologetically humanist, a perspective that she argues is sustained across Marx's early and mature writings. Given her goal of presenting a Marxian ethics, one of the more surprising conclusions

of her book is to defend the idea of the abolition of morality, or, more specifically, the claim that morality would entirely lose its function and significance within a fully developed communist society. As she discusses at length, Marx is consistently and scathingly critical of moral theories, moral suasion, and moralizing, often referring to "bourgeois" morality and morality as ideology. This poses a particularly difficult challenge for someone who wants to defend Marx as nonetheless presenting a coherent and thoroughgoing ethical vision. What is also surprising is that Wills does not take either of the two easier paths out of this puzzle.

A first easy way out is to draw a distinction between the bad or *mere* moralizing of philosophical theories of morality and the ethically thick sense of human nature and flourishing that Marx defends. Drawing a distinction between *morality* more narrowly understood and a richer notion of *ethics* is a common strategy, taken by figures as wide-ranging as Hegel to Bernard Williams. However, Wills chooses not to take this path. In an important footnote near the very beginning of her book, she writes: "I use the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' interchangeably throughout this book, and neither in an inherently pejorative manner" (p. 247). I think not drawing some distinction between morality and ethics poses some problems for her argument. To begin to see why, let me turn to the second easy path not taken.

For that, we have to start with the *locus classicus* for Marx's claim about the abolition of morality: *The Communist Manifesto*. In a section that reads as an "objections and replies" with critics of communism, communists are being accused of advocating for abolishing property, freedom, individuality, family, law, morality, nationalities, politics, and religion, and Marx and Engels try to reply to each of these accusations in turn.

The second easy way out that Wills does not take is to say that Marx and Engels do not mean to argue for the abolition of morality *as such*, but just *bourgeois morality*—that is, the morality of individualistic duties and personal responsibilities, including Kantianism (Wills devotes a chapter to a discussion of Marx's rejection of rival moral theories from Christianity to utilitarianism, with a special focus on Kant). Indeed, this is the strategy taken by Marx and Engels in responding to the charge that communists want to abolish freedom, individuality, and even the family. The retort here is simply that they intend to abolish *bourgeois* iterations of freedom, individuality, and the family, which at best represent partial and alienated versions of what these phenomena could be.

Wills, however, insists that this reading is mistaken, and she argues that it is important to distinguish between the concepts of freedom and individuality on the one hand, and ideas of morality, religion, and law on the other. She claims that individuality and freedom are "constitutive features of unalienated human social being," whereas

> morality et al., on the other hand, which [Marx] and Engels describe as forms of ideology, also develop in ways that are determined by human history, but they belong specifically to a particular period within that history—the period within which human life is structured by domination, class conflict, and exploitation. Freedom and individuality in their human, rather than merely bourgeois form, are essential features of fully realized human nature.… Morality, by contrast, belongs to the 'social consciousness' of a particular age—the age of class-based domination of some human beings over others, of external imperatives to which one is compelled to conform. The abolition of morality's bourgeois form … is therefore also morality's abolition *in toto*. There is no unalienated form which the abstract theorization of, and obedient submission to, an external moral law can take for beings who exist within "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (pp. 223–224)

Wills is right that there is a difference between freedom and individuality and "morality et al." for Marx, but I think she is mistaken to suggest that the latter can be fully identified with class societies and bourgeois ideology without the remainder (one way to mark this difference is that the latter, and I would include the family here, are *social practices and institutions* that produce the former, in more or less alienated ways). Note how Wills describes morality in this passage: "external imperatives to which one is compelled to conform" and "the abstract theorization of, and obedient submission to, an external moral law." This is *a very specific conception of morality*, clearly recalling Kantianism. It is also clearly what Marx and Engels would call bourgeois morality. Thus, despite the fact that Wills does not want to draw a distinction between moralizing philosophical theories and a thicker sense of humanistic ethics, I think that, ultimately, she (and Marx and Engels) only rejects the former and not the latter. More importantly, rejecting the latter would undermine the very ethical vision defended in the rest of the book, one in which human life and its productive activity are *inherently* ethical insofar as human flourishing is at stake. As Wills herself writes: "Ethics concerns questions about what we ought to do, how we ought to live, and how we ought to treat one another. For communists, that 'ought' is intrinsically connected to a conception of the essential nature of human beings and the conditions of our flourishing" (p. 4). What would abolishing *this* sense of morality or ethics (where these are not distinguished) even mean for human beings? Given the inextricable connection between ethics and human flourishing for Wills' Marx, would not the abolition of morality or ethics in *this* sense just entail the abolition of human life and activity?

Wills acknowledges the difficulty here and attempts to clarify by providing different interpretive options for the abolition of morality claim. In her preferred interpretation, the abolition of morality means that there would be "no genuine fact of the matter about morality in a fully developed communist society" at all (p. 225). There is no genuine fact of the matter about morality, no claims or obligations, because under communism, the gap between *is* and *ought* would be entirely closed. She writes:

> Human beings in such a society would be no more morally required to behave in prosocial ways than they are "morally required" to be primates. It is helpful here to think heuristically of morality as concerning a "gap"

> between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. No gap, no fact of the matter about what ought to be done to close the gap (p. 225)

Later, using another analogy, she suggests that within fully developed communism, an injunction to treat fellow human beings as ends in themselves would be no more or less necessary than telling one's heart to keep beating (p. 238). I see several problems with this strongly optimistic view. First, some distinction between the *is* and the *ought* (if not a metaphysically uncloseable gap) strikes me as required for the comprehensibility of human action. To have a desire is to ascertain that some actual condition ought to be otherwise, and to be potentially moved to act to transform that condition. Fully erasing the gap between *is* and *ought* is to erase the very possibility of human or animal action. Second, even under maximally ideal social and political conditions, broadly ethical or moral questions about what one ought to do would surely still arise. Relationships would still break up, friends could still betray one another, and lies would still be told. Young humans exhibit both prosocial and antisocial tendencies and prosociality would still need to be cultivated *ethically*, even if social conditions maximally supported prosocial tendencies and disincentivized antisocial tendencies. Finally, from a political standpoint, envisioning communism as a closing of the gap between the *is* and the *ought* strikes me as an overly static vision of the struggle to bring forth a world beyond capitalism that better promotes the needs and free development of each and all. What the young Marx admired in Hegel was his dialectical understanding of the is and the ought in a dynamic reality, rather than simply the possibility that this gap could be closed once and for all. Whatever a future beyond capitalism looks like, gaps between *is* and *ought* would continue to drive both individual and social action, hopefully with the aims of human flourishing in view.

Despite our disagreement here, Wills' book is an essential reading for both scholars and a broader audience interested in an unapologetic and hopeful defense of Marx's thinking for our own time. It is an urgent call to take Marx's ethical vision seriously, a much-needed light to guide us through the darkness, distortion, and equally unapologetic oppressive forces of the present.