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Ideology as Moral Discourse or Struggle for Power

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Genuine philosophers...are commanders and legislators: they say, 'thus it shall be'...
Their 'knowing' is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is--will to power.
-Friedrich Nietzsche¹

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.
-Karl Marx²

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and of history is the demonstration that there is no abstract 'human nature', fixed and immutable..., but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations.
-Antonio Gramsci³

This paper argues that moral discourse, the attempt through reasoned analysis and discussion to discover or agree upon moral principles to govern social life, is for all its seeming detachment an ideological aspect of a real world struggle for power. Section I argues the point with reference in particular to liberal ideology and by implication to all moral philosophy.
Section II addresses some more general theoretical issues implicit in Section I's analysis.

I.

Moral and legal rights are central to liberal ideology. They are basic to the United States' most fundamental political documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
The former asserts the profound moral sentiment that all people are created equal and have the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This great moral principle was made into law in the Constitution, which created a decision-making process designed to establish justice, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty, and in the Bill of Rights, which set forth some of the substantive rights which presumably flow from these inalienable moral rights.

There is thus a close connection in liberal ideology between law and morality. Not that law is necessarily moral, but that morality is a standard by which to judge law. Law is deemed just when it complies with morality, and unjust when it does not. Some standard of morality is thus integral to liberal ideology. On its own terms liberal ideology purports to be moral, either as comporting with some established moral standard or as entailing a discursive process whose end is to discover or create, and then to put into practice, some such standard. Without this moral underpinning liberal ideology collapses into an amoral power struggle. Rather than presenting a vision of the just society, liberal ideology becomes, at least to those who do not buy in, a legitimation (propaganda, to put it bluntly) for a particular power arrangement. My theme here, then, will be just this: that liberal ideology, and by implication all moral philosophy, masks a struggle for power or (put better perhaps) is an ideological aspect of a power struggle fought on an illusory though not insignificant or meaningless plane.

Two major problems currently face liberal ideology, both of which boil down to a crisis of legitimacy—a crisis which the legitimacy crises of the bureaucratic socialist regimes may temporarily obscure but may also presage. Indeed, I am convinced that severe social upheaval is not too far off in the United States.

The problems facing liberal ideology are practical and theoretical. On a practical level,
liberal society fails to measure up in practice to any of its competing moral visions. Just a few examples. Liberal ideology highly values individual liberty, especially as to so-called personal matters. Yet many states still outlaw homosexual conduct, even in the privacy of one's home, and the Supreme Court has upheld such laws. Most versions of liberal ideology also value equal opportunity. Yet the great disparities in the quality of public education, as reflected in numerous lawsuits challenging inequalities in educational financing, hardly comport with this ideal and seriously disadvantage the already disadvantaged who disproportionately reside in the poorer and inferior school districts. And various versions of liberal ideology also tout the general welfare. Yet in recent years wealth disparities have widened in the United States, as the rich afford increasingly luxurious life-styles while the middle class' standard of living has stagnated and a growing and rigidifying underclass experiences poverty and despair.

Not that liberal ideology cannot attempt to explain away these anomalies. Liberal principles are sufficiently variable and flexible that it is always possible to mount an argument that a seemingly inconsistent state of affairs somehow complies with liberal principles. The outlawing of certain sexual practices, for example, might be justified per the community's democratic interest in protecting community mores; disparities in educational financing might be justified as providing consumers a choice of educational services and per the democratic interest in local control; and wealth disparities might be justified as the inevitable byproduct of meritocracy and as creating incentives to productivity to the benefit of all. And to the extent that seeming anomalies cannot be explained away, liberalism's defense is that liberal society contains within itself the means and possibility of reform and that the realization of liberal principles in practice is a process which extends over time and is a goal toward which liberal society is progressing. Legitimacy crises arise when, despite reform measures, large
numbers of people come to see liberal society as failing to live up to its promise, as incapable of doing so, and as institutionalizing exploitation and oppression in the name of liberal principles.

Liberalism’s theoretical problems are related to its practical problems and contribute to crises of legitimacy. When people perceive practice as failing to match theory, they begin to question the validity and viability of the theory. Indeed, liberal theory is currently under fire, if so far mostly in academic circles and on the level of professional (or what Gramsci calls intellectual) philosophy and not as yet on the popular level (what Gramsci calls common sense). 7

On either level, no single professional or popular philosophy dominates liberal society, although altogether liberal philosophies do predominate. Rather there are competing liberal philosophies which share certain commonalities but also differ significantly in their outlooks and practical consequences. Nozick's libertarianism and Rawls' egalitarianism, for example, both value individual liberty but part company as regards the proper distribution of the social product. 8 Consequently, liberal society is engaged in a continual dialogue, on both a professional and popular level, over competing liberal philosophies. This dialogue stabilizes and legitimizes liberal society in that it enables needed reform and gives people a sense of participation in determining their own and society's destiny. But it also potentially destabilizes and delegitimizes in that it opens the door to critiques of liberalism and to alternative ways of thinking.

Enter liberalism's theoretical problems, two of which I wish to emphasize: the problem of indeterminacy in applying liberal principles in practice, and the problem of validating the principles in the first place. Indeterminacy arises when general principles, such as those set forth in the Bill of Rights, must be applied to resolve real world controversies. The problem is that the principles themselves rarely if ever dictate definitive outcomes, thus necessitating an interpretive
process in which it is always possible to mount plausible arguments on both sides of every case but without being able to determine "the" right answer. Which is to say that there is no right answer, i.e., no provably right answer, but only two or more possible answers with quite differing social consequences, all of which answers satisfy liberalism's standards of logic, coherence, consistency, and the like, i.e., reasoned analysis.

Competing arguments and diverse results are always possible in part (as the deconstructionists have shown) because of the inherent vagueness of language and in part because of the presence of competing principles pointing in opposite directions. Competing with free speech, for example, is the liberal principle that one should not act so as to harm others. The problem is that speech and action overlap. Speech can cause harmful actions. Thus Justice Holmes' famous example of yelling fire in a crowded theater. Thus the arguments of scholars who generally support free speech in favor of sanctions against pornography and racial defamation on the ground that such speech harms women and ethnic minorities both directly and by promoting sexist and racist practices. Thus the argument of revolutionary governments that counter-revolutionary speech must be controlled lest it stimulate counter-revolutionary activity even on the part of those on whose behalf the revolution has been fought but who still suffer from false consciousness as a result of the prior regime's ideological hegemony.

Even assuming definitiveness in applying the free speech principle, there is still the problem of establishing the principle's validity. Why, for instance, should free speech receive constitutional protection? Because, presumably, free speech is mandated by the still more basic moral principle, which itself poses comparable interpretive problems, that people have the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But what establishes the validity of that or any other liberal principle?
One way of attempting to validate liberal principles is through reasoned analysis. Much ink has been so spilled. The problem here is that reasoned analysis is not an external standard against which to judge the validity of liberal principles, but is an internal aspect of liberal ideology itself. Consequently, even if through some elaborate analysis one could demonstrate the validity of liberal principles, this would differ little in substance from concluding that, say, adultery is wrong because the Bible says so. Similarly, the Declaration of Independence asserts the validity of its inalienable rights as self-evident truth. This resort to self-evidence also underlies more comprehensive liberal theories, and ultimately I would contend all philosophical thinking. Compare, for instance, the very first sentence of Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia: "People have rights and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)." This is a bald assertion. Accept it and the rest of Nozick's argument may (or may not) follow; without this prior acceptance, the system is a house of cards.

In other words, just as the truths of the Bible depend on one's first accepting the Bible as truth, so the validity of liberal principles depends on one's first accepting liberalism as a system, inclusive of liberalism's own criterion of validity, i.e., reasoned analysis. Reasoned analysis, then, becomes an exercise in self-justification of self-evident truths. But since what is self-evident to one person is not to another, this demonstration of liberal ideology's circularity seriously undermines its alleged moral foundation and supports the notion that it is simply an aspect of a power struggle—whether a struggle for material domination, or for freedom from oppression, or for the ascendance of some unprovable moral truth.

An alternative way of attempting to validate liberal principles is through consensus theory. This picks up on liberalism's pragmatic strain. If people can agree on guiding principles and on their interpretation, then one might say that for all practical purposes those principles are
valid; since through consensus they are accepted as valid, the inability to otherwise validate (or invalidate) them is of no practical consequence. A major problem, though, with consensus theory is the difficulty of achieving unanimity. Anything less leads to demands for justification from those who disagree and who because they are in the minority may have to conform with majority will or at least live with its consequences.

Consensus theorists respond to this problem in several ways. The utilitarian response (in at least some of its versions) is to posit in the absence of unanimity the moral principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, to be determined on the basis of people's preferences expressed in the marketplace and the political process. Both, however, have drawbacks which severely undercut the utilitarian approach. The market solution, for example, is touted (albeit erroneously due to the pervasiveness of spillover costs) as a form of unanimity, in that people voluntarily enter transactions only when they deem them advantageous. But even on the dubious assumption that people always act rationally, the circumstances under which truly voluntary transactions occur may produce results which seem morally objectionable and may conflict with other liberal principles. A homeless, jobless, starving person might well agree to submit to slavery, and might well be better off in so doing, but in so doing would be ceding away the inalienable right to liberty. Indeed, a marxist would view most nominally voluntary transactions in the liberal marketplace, especially those involving the sale of one's labor, as similarly exploitative. The liberal political process, which is in a sense just an alternative market, is also problematic in that imbalances in political power may produce results which are exploitative and oppressive even as to those who vote for them and in that majoritarian decision-making (even assuming its accuracy as a utilitarian calculation) may tyrannize a perpetual minority.

The liberal egalitarian response, on the other hand, attempts to reach unanimity. Rawls'
A Theory of Justice, for example, which combines reasoned analysis and consensus theory, attempts to achieve a hypothetical unanimity by positing a discourse among rational people formulating principles to govern social life in ignorance of who they will be in the course of history. Voila, what emerges are certain egalitarian liberal principles, morally mandated in the real world despite the absence of real world consensus because this is what disinterested rational people would agree to. However, not only is it highly debatable what principles such people would in fact agree to, but Rawls' approach, by building into the discourse an egalitarian starting point, ensures that substantively egalitarian principles of some type will emerge. But this is all circular reasoning again, in that it assumes as a given the moral desirability of equality. And thus, like reasoned analysis, liberal consensus theory is ultimately a matter of acceptance, of belief, of faith.

Nor is the ultimate dependence on faith peculiar to liberal ideology, but rather I would argue pervades all ideology. Marx, for example, in one of his more utopian moments, advanced as communism's guiding principle: from each according to ability, to each according to needs. This formulation is in form much like some abstract first principle of liberalism, say the inalienable right to pursue happiness, to be interpreted and implemented through practical action, as per a constitution and bill of rights perhaps. Yet, as principle, it poses the same difficulties associated with liberal ideology: the problems of indeterminacy of application and of establishing the principle's initial validity. What does to each according to needs mean under conditions of scarcity? Will everyone agree or will scarcity produce conflict over the meaning and validity of the principle? Or will the principle be realizable only at some unforeseeable, if not unattainable, future time when scarcity and conflict have been totally eliminated?

Being materially oriented and skeptical of abstract reason, even as he used liberalism's
tools of reasoned analysis to subvert liberal ideology, Marx said little about the details of communist society and did not attempt to prove the validity of his first principle. This is in keeping with marxism's deterministic strain which in the extreme views communism as inevitable and inexorable, such that proving it true or false through reasoned analysis is a superstructural irrelevancy. It is also in keeping with the more contemporary and dialectical notion of praxis, which sees history as both determined and volitional at the same time and sees truth as the product of the interplay of theory and practice and thus as not discernible through reasoned analysis alone.

There is thus much of pragmatism in the notion of praxis, mindful of liberalism's consensus approach to truth. This raises, again, the problems discussed earlier of the absence of unanimity and of the conditions under which dialogue occurs. In response Habermas speaks of "an ideal situation of discourse" as a way (presumably) to avoid distortions resulting from dialogue under conditions of inequality and (ultimately perhaps) to achieve unanimity. Note the similarity to Rawls, although in keeping with marxism's rejection of abstract idealism Habermas' ideal discourse is to occur among real people in the real world. This avoids the problem of speculating on the outcome of the dialogue, since the outcome remains to be seen. But like Rawls', Habermas' approach risks circularity in that it requires certain ideal background conditions which will then impact the dialogue's outcome.

Dialectics may help out here. Once one comes to believe in praxis and thus in discourse as an approach to the human condition, while also viewing the existing conditions as exploitative and oppressive and recognizing the reciprocity of process and substance, then some non-exploitative and non-oppressive background conditions become necessary. These conditions cannot be fully specified in advance, however, because they are subject to the
interaction between theory and practice. Moreover, since those in power never willingly cede power, discourse alone will never bring about an ideal situation of discourse. Power struggles of all types are also necessary, and are as much a part of praxis as is discourse.

The struggle for rights—whether negative or positive, individual or group—is just such a power struggle. Indeed, the very concept of right presupposes struggle. Rights are relational. By definition rights entail the duty of others not to interfere with or to accord those rights. Claims of right arise out of conflict. The right not to be discriminated against on account of race, or gender, or whatever, exists only because discrimination exists; without discrimination no one would think to assert the right. Claims of right are thus symptomatic of exploitation and oppression, or in other words of alienation. As long as rights or claims of right persist, so does the alienation which gives rise to them.

But the struggle for rights is also a means of overcoming alienation by building solidarity in the struggle against domination. Thus Marx and Engels’ call to the workers of the world to unite. One aspect of unity is what one is struggling against. Also, if not equally important, is what one is struggling for. Thus the importance of a vision of a better world, a vision which cannot be proven true because truth lies in the future, but can only be accepted on faith as a vision worth struggling for. Why not a vision of a world in which everyone contributes according to their abilities and receives according to their needs?

My conclusion, then, is this: that we all have moral or idealistic visions of the world, deriving from and developing in the course of our interactions with the world; that these visions differ widely; that the truth of our visions ultimately depends on faith and on putting them into practice; and that accomplishing that depends on our ability to coalesce with enough others who share or can be convinced to accept our visions that we can prevail in social life's unavoidable
power struggle.

II.

It is not my contention that moral reasoning is worthless. On the contrary, moral discourse greatly influences the course of history. Rather an epistemological and an ontological point is being made.

The epistemological point is that on an abstract level there are fundamental disagreements among divergent moral philosophies which cannot be resolved through reasoned analysis alone. This is because philosophy is embedded in history, that in history there are competing philosophies, and that there is no external standard by which to determine which of the competing philosophies is correct. Any standard of truth is simply part of some philosophy embedded in history. Moreover, divergent philosophies have competing criteria of truth, which simply reproduces the problem of the irreconcilability of competing philosophies on another level. Nor is there an impartial judge to resolve the conflict. Human beings themselves must resolve it, and they come to the problem with a philosophical perspective on the problem, i.e., a bias of some kind either as to the correct solution to the problem or as to an approach for resolving it. Even though that perspective may change in the course of addressing the problem, through the influence of experience and the exchange of ideas, it still remains a bias in the sense that every perspective is a bias in an indeterminate world, a world without objective criteria of truth.

Even reflective equilibrium, assuming it is possible to engage in such a process, is in this sense a bias in that it posits the appropriateness in approaching philosophical and moral problems by divorcing oneself from whatever interests one has at stake, or at least from those interests one has as a particular human being as against those which are common to all humans qua humans.
But the process and substance of philosophical reasoning cannot be so easily separated. Process is substance in that whatever procedure is used to reason about substantive moral principles will impact if not determine the outcome of the reasoning process. In this sense, neutrality is not neutral and impartiality is not impartial. Rather they are themselves substantive moral standards as to the way in which the reasoning process should be conducted, and must be verified by the very reasoning process whose foundation they form. But, then, the outcome of the reasoning process, at least as to the manner in which the process should be conducted, is predetermined. And, of course, that process will confirm its own foundations because its foundations are embedded in it. There is a circularity here from which there is no escape.

This leads to the ontological point that social life consists of a power struggle over competing visions of the good life and of the just society. This is not to say that the struggle is necessarily over who is to be master and who the slave, although such struggles have been commonplace. The effort to overcome disempowerment and to institute a non-oppressive social order is as much a power struggle as is the effort to dominate others. One having a vision of the good and of justice—and everyone has such a vision at some level of consciousness, even if only that vision which is implicit in one's actions—must want to put it into practice. The good and the just are by definition practically oriented, in that they relate to how one should live one's life and how one should treat others. If the existing state of affairs is not good or is unjust, then to accept the situation and not attempt to change it would be to violate one's own vision, to live an ungood life, to participate (at least by acquiescence) in treating others unjustly.

One might say, therefore, that truth is not an intellectual matter but a practical one, that the truth of one's vision and the test of its truth depend on putting it into practice. From a pragmatic perspective this follows by definition, since pragmatism posits the truth of what
works. But, then, one might just as well say that the concept of truth is an intellectual irrelevancy in that what really matters is not the truth of one's vision but whether it works. Making it work depends, in turn, both on the political struggle to implement one's vision in the face of opposition from those with competing visions, and on consensus and shared understandings without which no one is powerful enough to implement one's vision. The greater the consensus, the easier it is to put a vision into practice, and easiest yet with universal consensus. Striving for universal consensus, then, must be the ultimate goal of praxis, for universal agreement is what assures the ability to implement and maintain one's vision. Universal consensus, however, does not necessarily mean the sameness of everyone's vision. The consensus might be, for example, that every individual is free to practice his or her own vision of the good life or that particular groups of people are free to develop their own principles of justice to govern their internal affairs, so long as they conform to certain agreed upon principles of justice governing relations among individuals and between groups.

Still, striving for consensus is itself a power struggle. This is most obviously so when someone attempts to gain adherents to one's vision through coercion or indoctrination, as has occurred frequently throughout history and has usually been justified as consistent with that vision. God's will, for example, has often been used to justify forcible conversion. Indeed, since in the course of rearing its children every family and every society must promote some point of view which will unavoidably influence its children, indoctrination of some type and degree is inevitable in any striving for consensus. Even arms length dialogue among mature adults entails a struggle for power—a polite struggle perhaps if people are willing to agree to limit political struggle as a means of advancing their theories while the dialogue is on-going, but a struggle nevertheless. Dialogue commonly includes attempts to convince others of the correctness of and
to adopt one's theory. This is power struggle not only in that such attempts typically involve subtle coercion in the form of appeals to wisdom and experience, the exploitation of others' uncertainties and insecurities, and the like, but also in that the objective is to position others so as to more easily put in place a theory which one has already staked out prior to participating or which one develops while engaging in dialogue.

Perhaps if people were to agree not only to dialogue and to suspend political struggle in the meantime, but also to refrain from trying to convince others and to suspend final judgment until dialogue produces consensus, we might have a non-power struggle situation. But that is not a possible situation in the real world, since there will always be those who are unwilling to postpone efforts to put their theories into practice. I certainly wouldn't because I see a world in which some dominate and oppress others. In that context an agreement to suspend political struggle and attempts to win adherents would favor the dominant forces, whose incentive would be to string out the dialogue indefinitely so as to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. Moreover, since the dominant forces will attempt to use their predominant power to bias society's institutions which most influence people's thinking—especially, in the modern world, the mass media and the educational system—so as to promote ways of thinking beneficial to their continued dominance, consciousness raising is a crucial aspect of any attempt to foster a non-dominative and non-oppressive theory and practice.

This is not to suggest that ideology operates in a strictly instrumental or functional way, reflecting or corresponding to people's material and class positions and interests. This would be to objectify one's interests and to make them independent of and prior to one's theory, which would then serve either to support or rationalize those interests if one were thinking accurately or to undercut them if one were suffering from false consciousness. The view offered here, rather,
is that people's interests are as they come to be theoretically defined as the result of the interaction between all their life experiences and their reflections on those experiences. From this vantage point what is false consciousness to one person is not to another, and false consciousness refers not to one's failure to correctly perceive reality or define one's true interests but to the impact that exposure to divergent ways of thinking might have on how one perceives reality and defines one's interests. In this sense, since everyone carries cultural baggage and can never fully escape the influence of their culture, everyone suffers from or experiences false consciousness. Consciousness raising is an aspect of struggle in that it attempts to expose people and ultimately win them over to new ways of thinking.

That people who seem similarly situated in their material and class positions often adopt common or similar ways of thinking, and that their theories often differ from differentially situated people, does suggest that material and class factors influence people's thinking. At the same time, that people who seem similarly situated often adopt divergent ways of thinking suggests the influence of either differential nuances in people's experience (everyone's experience being to some degree unique) or of reflective differences in how people evaluate similar experiences (everyone's reflective process being to some degree unique as well perhaps). This raises the question of whether people's experiences fully determine what they define as their interests, such that with enough data it might be possible to predict everyone's thought process, or whether reflection is at least to some degree independent of experience. This in turn raises questions as to whether people have free will as well as to the very meaning of that concept. Thus, the process of theorizing raises basic questions about human nature, questions which have not yet been satisfactorily answered and may be impossible to answer because human nature itself may be theoretically indeterminate, or to put it another way may be an overdetermined and
constantly changing aspect of the interaction of theory and practice throughout the course of history. Human nature, from this vantage point, is as embedded in history and as much a focus of struggle as is the struggle over competing moral visions. Since competing moral visions encompass competing visions of human nature, the struggle to put one's moral vision into practice is also a struggle to realize one's vision of human nature.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 7th International Social Philosophy Conference, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, August 8-11, 1991. I would like to thank all those at the conference who were kind enough to comment on the paper.


5 See Edgewood Independent School District v. Kirby, 777 S.W.2d 391 (Supreme Court of Texas, 1989), and cases cited therein.


7 Gramsci, op. cit., pp. 323-43.


12 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The Communist Manifesto.