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One Ethic and Many Moralities?

AT THE end of this article—without any etymological or theoretical pretensions—I distinguish between *ethics* and *morals*. By *ethics* I mean a level of practical requirements valid for everyone in every historical situation. If world history forms a *single* totality, there is a *single* ethic. By *morals*, on the other hand, I mean the level specific to a particular historical system (Aztec, Inca, Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, feudal, European capitalist, etc.). As there is a plurality of particular historical totalities, and as there are different epochs in history, it is a historical and sociological fact that there are *many* different moralities. Faced with this *fact* of different moralities, the question is how—if at all—we can justify a *single* ethic valid for the whole of world history as the *omnitudo realitatis* of concrete human existence.

1. HEGEL'S ATTEMPT¹

The Tübingen philosopher and theologian (1770-1831) was born a century after the triumph of the English bourgeoisie, and in his youth saw the bourgeoisie seize power in France. His life coincided with the spread of industrial capitalism. His theoretical work led, either consciously or unconsciously—this does not matter—to an ethical system which articulated and explained—and so justified—bourgeois morality. For this, he made use of the best of a long theoretical tradition which there is no space here to recount; we can only point to its fruits, its contributions to the development of thought.

As for Kant ('the root of evil')² and Schelling ('hence the universal need for sin and death as the real negation of particularity'),³ so also for Hegel, good consists in 'not upholding particularity as essential in the face of universality'.⁴ In other words, evil is particularisation, taking the part for the whole, concentrating on the specific without daring to plunge into the universal: 'The finite immediacy of the individual subject . . . is first defined as nothingness and evil, and then (embarks on) the movement which consists in the negation of one's immediate natural determination . . . so as to come together with oneself in the pain of negativity and in this manner to know oneself as united to essence'.⁵ Evil is someone who is and persists in being different, distinct, determinate, and who refuses to dissolve himself in 'the Same', the All, the Absolute of being—an act resembling Hindu *nirvana* or *gnosis*.

Hegel bases his consideration of the singleness of ethics and the plurality of morals in world history on this ontology of Totality. The plurality of morals comes effectively to

be found at the level of the degree of universality attaching to the 'moral code' of each people. The individual as particularity is taken up in and swallowed up by his country, whereas: 'Concrete ideas, the spirits of peoples, have their truth and definition in the concrete Idea, which as concrete Universality is the Spirit of the world'.⁶ One should not forget that this 'Spirit' is the Holy Spirit in his *Philosophy of Religion*.

So, what is the relationship between the particular moralities of different peoples in history and the universal ethic of world history? Hegel explains: 'Since history is the configuration of the Spirit in the form of event . . .', 'the people that receives such an element as a natural principle . . . is the dominant people at that period in world history. . . . Against the absolute right this people has as present bearer of the degree of development of the world Spirit, the spirit of other peoples *has no rights at all*'.⁸ This means that the particularity of the moralities of different peoples is resolved on the level of a universal ethic through fetishisation of the morals of the dominant people at a given epoch of world history. In other words, a universal ethic is not found on the level of an abstraction valid for all peoples and all cultures, but is simply the particular morality of a people that as 'bearer' (*Träger* in the original) of the Spirit—and it bears the Spirit simply because it dominates the world in its time: domination becomes a manifestation of divinity—takes on in its own particularity the concrete universality of world history as a totality. And if we bear in mind that this people bears the Spirit in order that God may recognise himself in it and bring about the full realisation of his Return in it, then it will be seen that the universal ethic, the fetishisation of the morality of the dominant people, is the State religion.⁹ The moralities of other peoples, 'like barbarians',¹⁰ can find a place only 'round the throne (of the dominant people) as agents of its fulfilment, as witnesses and ornaments of its splendour'.¹¹

Humanity can seldom have found a better theology of domination!

2. POST-HEGELIAN ATTEMPTS

Thanks to Schelling in his old age,¹² to Kierkegaard's critique of the fetishisation of Christianity,¹³ to the Lutheran theologian Feuerbach's sensitive recall to christological principles,¹⁴ and to many others, a whole generation rebelled against the idealist philosophy of Identity. Karl Marx (1818-1883) belonged to this generation, and the whole of his thought can be classed as ethical in intent. Really, from the 1844 writings to his death, he was dealing with just one theme: 'Thou shalt not steal!' If he can be criticised for anything, it is that this demand so obsessed him that it became the *leitmotiv* of his being, both practically and theoretically. The theme of the morality of particular systems and the requirements of a universal ethic forms the basis of his inquiries—a fact that often goes unnoticed by his supporters and detractors alike.

He analyses a given system, a specific totality, and its historical morality: that of capitalism. His conclusion is that the system as a totality, or political economy as its theoretical expression, behaves as a limitation denying, despising, not discovering or appreciating exteriority, otherness, other people: 'Political economy does not consider the unemployed worker, or the working man, in so far as they are *outside* the wage-earner relationship. . . . They are figures who *do not exist* for it, except as *for other people*, for the eyes . . . of the poorhouse warden; they are ghosts *excluded from its kingdom*'.¹⁵

The subject and the requirements of a universal ethic belong to the realm of the exteriority of the system and capitalist morality. The proprietor and the wage-earner are parts of capitalist morality but man '*as man*' and not only '*as worker*' falls outside the scope of the system.¹⁶ Man, who also works, is really *nothing* to the capitalist system: 'The abstract existence of man as pure working man . . . can fall every day from its full

nothingness to absolute nothingness, in his social non-existence which is his real non-existence'.¹⁷

In other words, and understanding this nothingness as the reality of *exteriority* for the morality of the system,¹⁸ man—not as the wage-earner who enters into a contract, but as a free subject who can also be subject of *other systems* since his real and specific being (which is the *subject* of a universal ethic) is not exhausted by the abstract relationship of 'wage-earner'—this man has absolute (ethical) needs over and above the abstract (moral) needs of capitalism. Capitalism's moral demand is: 'Thou shalt not steal thy neighbour's private property', or: 'Thou shalt acquire thy riches by the sweat of thy brow'. But it immediately contradicts itself, since some (the owners of capital) have the right to take over the private property of others (their work, which is largely unpaid). Then morality and political economy part company and 'the fact that each sphere measures me by standards different from and opposed to those of the other, morality by one set, political economy by another, stems from the essence of man's alienation'.¹⁹ Morality no longer judges structures; it becomes 'arbitrary, occasional, trivial, non-scientific'.²⁰ The only area common to both sets of standards is a set of individual requirements well-defined in advance: sexual behaviour, behaviour in relation to the laws of the country, etc. There are no longer any absolute ethical criteria valid for both abstract morality and political economy, whereas one function of a universal ethic would be to judge political economy from absolute human criteria. Therefore, 'the relationship between political economy and morality . . . when it is not just a deceptive appearance but considered *essential*, cannot be anything other than the relationship between economic laws and morality. . . . Political economy is then limited to expressing moral laws in its own way'.²¹ So not only does Marx not deny a universal ethic, but he criticises the hypocrisy of splitting off an abstract, restricted morality opposed to a political economy immoral in its principles and its conclusions. What absolute criterion did he use to judge whether an action was ethical or not? It was this (space limits me to quoting from an early work, but it would not be difficult to find the same theme in works of 1857 or 1863): 'Work, the *vital activity* (author's italics), productive *life* itself, seems to man a means to satisfy a need. . . . Productive *life* is *life* in general. It is the *life* that creates *life*. The nature of the species is to be found in its *vital* activity . . . free, conscious activity, the nature of human *life*. . . . Man makes his *vital* activity the very object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious *vital* activity. This alone makes his activity free. Alienated work inverts the relationship'.²² Good consists in the full realisation of *human* life ('feeling, thinking, looking, seeing, desiring, acting, loving. . . . Man's grasp of *human* reality, his behaviour in relation to the object, is the affirmation of *human* reality'),²³ which is an absolute principle of universal ethics. The very basis of bourgeois morality and the capitalist system is judged and found wanting in the name of this principle: 'Political economy, despite its outwardly harmless appearance, is a true moral science, the most moral of all the sciences.'²⁴

Why is this? Because: 'With respect to the worker, who grasps nature through his work, this grasping becomes an objectivisation, his own activity becomes activity for another and of another; the life-force becomes a holocaust of life, producing an object for the benefit of an outside power'.²⁵ Or, to put it another way, work, man's feeling and *spiritual* activity,²⁶ is objectivised in the product²⁷ and happiness²⁸ is regained in consumption or satisfaction of needs. *Life* is objectiveness in the product. All production is either for oneself or for others; this 'for others' is a requirement of society and of human development. This is good: I produce for him and he produces for me. But if there is no reciprocity, if I go on producing 'for him' and he produces nothing for me, then there is a 'loss': 'Objectivisation as *loss* of the object and slavery. . . . Life lent to the object confronts it as something strange and hostile'.²⁹ The accumulation of this 'loss of life', this 'holocaust' to a new god is the effective *death* of the worker, since

unconsumed products produced are a loss of life. This god, made up of so many deaths, is 'dead capital',³⁰ 'dead Mammon',³¹ the fetish to which the blood of all the workers is sacrificed as 'profit';³² it is the beast of the Apocalypse.³³

So Marx implicitly derives a universal ethic from criticism of historical and specific moralities. What Hegel regarded as good (the rule of the dominant nation), here becomes evil: the fetish for which the blood of the wage-slave is spilt.

3. THE ABSOLUTE AND CONCRETE CRITERION OF ETHICS

Europe's discovery and experience of other worlds (Oriental, Asiatic and Latin American cultures, etc.), other ethical codes, the values, norms and virtues of other peoples, gave rise to various attempts to find a universal basis for ethics: Nietzsche's 'eternal return of the Same';³⁴ the timeless and universal validity of *values*, even though their hierarchy could change, best exemplified in Scheller's phenomenological axiology;³⁵ the viewpoint of linguistic philosophy;³⁶ Heidegger's ontological critique,³⁷ etc. One by one, however, the limitations of each system became apparent. Generally speaking, they were all returns to a Kantian, neo-Kantian or pre-dialectical approach: positivisms or neo-positivisms. This can be seen from some aspects³⁸ of the reply to the question: What is the *absolute criterion* on which an ethic valid for *every* given moral situation can be based?

The final basis of ethical conduct—'ethnicity'—(which should not be confused with its morality) would not seem to be the *law*. The law as norm in the form of legislation is a requirement that good (the *bonum*, *télos* or 'project') be done. And yet the moral law of any given system (whether positive or based on 'custom') can be unjust. This means it cannot be put forward as an absolute criterion. Even 'natural' law as an expression of human 'nature' is in need of a profound rethink. The Spanish Catholic philosopher Xavier Zubiri³⁹ has shown how the essence of human nature can be known from its results; these, however, will only be seen fully at the end of history, which means that, in effect, human essence comes to be known dialectically and progressively, but never completely. The same applies to the 'natural' law: law can only be a principle of the morality of a system, not an absolute criterion.

Values are in the same category.⁴⁰ The axiological schools' exaltation of values is no more than an idolising of mediation. Values are no more than the character *held* (not the essence) by mediation *as* mediation: i.e., a possibility is 'valid' to the extent that it is an actual or possible 'means' to an end. So it cannot be an absolute criterion but only a step on the way to one. Idolising values hides the basis, the project, the essence of the system. Surreptitiously, the axiologists are once more trying to impose the European view of man through mediations which they claim to be everlasting and universally valid.

The same can be said of *virtue*, particularly since Nietzsche's critique.⁴¹ The medieval *vice* of avarice later became the *virtue* of saving. In the *ethos* of medieval nobility it was a sin and a vice to build up capital; in bourgeois and capitalist morality, the virtue of thrift is taught to children from an early age. This a real asceticism whose object of worship is Capital. What criterion can show whether a *custom* (*habitus* or *hexis*) is a vice or a virtue?

Good, the *bonum*, *télos* or 'project' (Heidegger's *Entwurf*, identified with *Sein* and 'potential being'), can equally be called into question when it is made the basis of a given historical system: was the *télos* or *finis* of the medieval order the same as that of the capitalist order? Can I know through its *content* a perfect human aim which can judge the finiteness, the evil, the determination of the 'projects' of these moralities? If there is a higher criterion by which I can judge the projects or *télos* which have operated in history, then these cannot be the ultimate basis of ethical discernment.

Emmanuel Levinas has shown⁴² that the Totality, the established order or system of 'the Same', can find in itself only the basis of a given morality (Greek, Aztec, medieval, capitalist . . .), but not the starting point of an ethic valid in every human situation—which it must be if it is to contain an absolute criterion. He has rightly shown that the sphere of the exteriority of the Other is the source from which an absolute, trans-ontological, metaphysical ethic must originate.⁴³ But Levinas has been unable to work out a political ethic, because since this falls into the ambiguity of a new totalisation, ethics would give way to a new morality of war and oppression. Partly thanks to the Frankfurt School,⁴⁴ but due far more to the Latin American peoples' struggle for liberation, we have been forced to work out a concept that will not only question historical moral totalities, but also build up 'new' Utopian totalities analogous to them which can be used by the liberated peoples.⁴⁵

In all these cases, the absolute, yet specific, criterion—or imperative—of an ethic valid for every human situation, capable of judging every particular historical moral system, could be expressed in these words: 'Liberate the poor and the oppressed!' The medieval formulation, 'Do good and avoid evil', was correct but completely abstract, which enabled it to justify a moral system on the basis of the notion of 'good' held by the system *itself*. It was only a moral principle, not an ethical one. The good of the system is the good of the oppressor; so the oppressor can be morally good and yet ethically perverse. He can be a perfectly 'good' capitalist according to bourgeois morality, and an unjust man because he pays inadequate (though not illegal) wages by ethical standards.

The principle 'Liberate the poor and the oppressed!', on the other hand, is the rational (besides being intrinsically Christian and biblical) *critical* criterion *par excellence* and the only one that can at one and the same time both include the moral system and, by its very formulation, demonstrate the inner transcendence and ethical exteriority of a future system, Utopian in its positivity and realism. In this concept, the 'poor' or oppressed include: (a) a totality in the form of an existing moral system; (b) an oppressor who is the subject of wrong actions; (c) a just man—at least in relation to the oppressor—unjustly treated. 'Liberate' includes: (d) taking account of the mechanisms of the established moral totality; (e) the ethical duty to take these mechanisms apart; (f) the need to build the way out of the system and the further duty of building a new system (still unsituated: Utopian) in which the oppressed of yesterday will be the citizen in the just morality of today.

This is an *ethical* requirement. It is ethical because it is trans-moral, trans-systemic, based on the exteriority of the Other, the poor, the oppressed. On the basis of the Other, and the *affirmation* of the Other (an *analectic* moment in the dialectic historical process) we can proceed to the *negation* of his *negation* in the system.

'Liberate the poor!' also has a *material*, fleshy content that can be grasped. It is a matter of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the stranger. As a requirement it is productive (giving bread: a product to be consumed), practical (with regard to the other), and economic (in respect of the historical structures of systems of oppression which have to be negated and the Utopian systems that have to be built up). It is a criterion that assumes the totality of the materialness of the *flesh* (*sárx*, *basar*), and the dialectical opposition to and overcoming of the plurality of moral systems on the basis of the requirements of a *transcendental*, *absolute* and yet concrete ethic—every historical system has had its oppressed!—because it is indissolubly linked to the mystery of human freedom.⁴⁶

4. AN ESCHATOLOGICAL AND CRITICAL ETHIC

Historical moral systems inevitably 'close in' in the period of their decadence (the period Spengler called 'civilised'), when the creative *pathos* of their founders (Joan of

Arc, George Washington) gives way to empires (the Caesar, the protagonists of more and more arms to El Salvador) and the persecution and death of the Roman circuses. This is the totalised Totality of 'the Same'. In these periods—and the present is one of them—it is essential to have an absolute, trans-systemic, trans-moral criterion, going beyond being, good, the law, values, the virtue of the system. It is needed not only—this is secondary—as a theoretical explanation for, but primarily as a historical justification of the ethical legitimacy of the liberating actions of the heroes the system condemns as immoral, tortures in its prisons and murders as the 'dregs of humanity'.

An ethic that will clarify the absolute criterion by which non-ethical moralities can be judged thus becomes a strategic necessity for the politics of liberation itself. It is the theoretical justification of the supreme dignity of the acts of its martyrs and heroes, and, by destroying 'good consciousness', shows up the fetishistic perversity of the existing, triumphalist moralities of the dominant systems.

In order to be able to forgive the soldiers who were torturing him, as Jesus did, he had to see very clearly that they were 'good' by the standards of 'their' Roman morality, and so unable to discover for themselves (the blindness characteristic of the ideological moral conscience of the dominator) the absolute—but always concrete in the here and now—requirements of a Utopian ethic of liberation by virtue of whose absolute criterion Jesus could face death in peace. He knew that his death, that of a bandit or outcast from the ruling moral system, was legal praxis for the future morality of a juster system. But even the legality of a future historical moral system could be judged by the absolute criterion of the ethic: 'Liberate the poor and the oppressed!' Even this future moral system, being historical, could and should be judged from the standpoint of the radical transcendentality of the Other, the poor, the oppressed. The transcendentality of the ethic thus exists on the eschatological level: it can also judge every historical future, just as the concepts of liberation and poor include the dimensions of transcendentality, exteriority and eschatology. *The negated life of the poor always judges death as an evil.*

Translated by Paul Burns

Notes

1. Hegel's morality is contained in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1821), and paras. 483-552 of the *Enzyklopaedie* (1817). In this context, see K. H. Ilting G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie 1818-31* (Munich, vol. I, 1973); F. Rosenzweig *Hegel und der Staat* (Munich 1920); G. Lukacs *Der Junge Hegel* (Berlin 1954); E. Weil *Hegel et l'Etat* (Paris 1950); etc. Hegel concerned himself with the subject from his earliest writings, esp. *System der Sittlichkeit* (1802). For convenience, I quote from the *Werke*, vols. I-XX (Frankfurt 1969-71).

2. *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (1793), B 39, A 36, n. 1; cf B 32, A 29ff.

3. *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* in *Werke*, VII, p. 382. These are the Greek and neo-Platonic themes, Buddhist and Rig-Veda ones, passing through Bruno and Boehme.

4. *Rechtsphilosophie* § 129, in vol. 7, p. 262.

5. *Enzyklopaedie* § 570, in vol. 10, p. 376. This is again the great Indo-European theme and so Hegel refers to Krishna (p. 383), the Persian mystics, Djadal-Ud-Rumi: 'I have seen the One everywhere', and the Bhagavad-Ghita.

6. *Rechtsphilosophie* § 352, p. 508.

7. *Ibid.* § 346, p. 505.

8. *Ibid.* § 347, pp. 505-506.

9. 'Religion and the basis of the State are one and the same thing, identical in themselves and for themselves' (*Phil. der Rel.* I, C, III, in vol. 16, p. 236).
10. *Rechtsphil.* § 351, p. 508.
11. *Ibid.* §352, p. 508.
12. Esp. the Berlin lectures of 1841 and *Philosophie der Mythologie* (begun in 1820) and *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (begun in 1827).
13. See *Post-scriptum* (Paris 1941); see K. Löwith *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Stuttgart 1964).
14. Remember *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft* (1843) (Frankfurt 1967), with its famous § 62: 'The true dialectic is not the monologue of the solitary thinker with himself, but the I-thou dialogue' (p. 111).
15. *MSS of '44* in *Karl Marx Frühe Schriften I* (Darmstadt 1962), p. 576: 'Gespenster ausserhalb ihres Reiches'.
16. *Ibid.*: 'As soon then, as Capital wishes, the worker ceases to exist, he ceases to exist in himself; he has no work and therefore no pay, and since he has no existence as a person (*als Mensch*) but only as a worker, he might as well be buried, or let himself starve to death'.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 578.
18. Remember that 'nothing' means precisely 'beyond' the system. St John of the Cross experienced the exteriority of the world as 'nothing' when he wrote in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: 'After everything: nothing'.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 614.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 615.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 614-615.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 567.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 598.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 612.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 574-575.
26. Marx was very far from either common or cosmological materialism when he wrote: 'the worker does not expend free physical and spiritual (*geistige*) energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his spirit (*Geist*)' (*ibid.*, p. 564).
27. 'After food, man's two greatest needs are clothing and shelter' (*Ibid.*, p. 548). Compare Matt. 25:35-6: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me'.
28. 'A society in which the majority are suffering is not a happy one . . . and the aim of Political Economy is the unhappiness of society' (*ibid.*, pp. 515-516).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 561.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 512: 'tote Kapital'.
31. *Ibid.*, ' . . . toten Mammons'.
32. *Ibid.*
33. One of the favourite themes of *Das Kapital* is the metaphor from the Apocalypse of 'the chosen people bearing on their foreheads the message that they belonged to Jahweh; the division of labour stamps on the forehead of the industrial worker the mark of his owner: Capital'. See F. Hinkelammert *Las armas ideológicas de la muerte* (San José, Costa Rica 1977) pp. 26ff.
34. Nietzsche, who was an implacable moral critic, ended up by making an apology for the warrior and dominating *ethos* of the primitive Germanic invaders of Europe.
35. See *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*, in *Gesammelte Werke* II (Berne 1954).
36. See G. Moore *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge 1903). Also the ethical works of Ayer, Wittgenstein, etc.
37. Heidegger puts forward a genuine 'ontological ethic' against the subjective idealism of Sartre in the 'Letter on Humanism', in which he is equally critical of axiological ethics.
38. For all this, see my *Para una ética de la liberación* (I-II, Buenos Aires 1973; III, Mexico 1977; IV-V, Bogotá 1979-80).
39. See *Sobre la esencia* (Madrid 1963).

40. See my *Ética* (n. 38 *supra*), I, ch. 2, § 7, pp. 70ff. 'Values' cannot be the basis but only a stage in the process.

41. Esp. in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (see *Ética*, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 82ff).

42. Cf. *Totalité et infini* (The Hague 1974).

43. I have given a summary explanation of this point in *Filosofía de la Liberación* (Bogota 1980), pp. 54ff.

44. See H. Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston 1964), which had a great influence on the critical philosophy of Adorno, Habermas, etc.

45. The subject of Vol. I of *Ética*, cited in note 38.

46. This is a subject of which various Christian and Jewish writers such as Blondel, Zubiri, Bergson, Buber, Rosenzweig, etc. have explored different aspects.