

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How Are Ideologies False? A Reconstruction of the Marxian Concept

Brian Leiter

University of Chicago  
Email: [bleiter@uchicago.edu](mailto:bleiter@uchicago.edu)

## Abstract

*For Karl Marx, ideological forms of consciousness are false, but how and in what respects? Ideologies must include some beliefs in order to be false, even if not all the beliefs that are inferentially related in the ideology are false, and even if there are (causally) related attitudes in the ideology that are neither true nor false. “Ideological” beliefs, however, are not simply false; their falsity has the specific property of not being in the interests of the agents who accept the ideology. One can make two kinds of mistakes about interests. One can mistake what is in one’s intrinsic interest or one can mistake what is in one’s extrinsic interest (that is, the means required to realize one’s intrinsic interests). Marx is mostly, but not exclusively, focused on mistakes about extrinsic interests; this is important in understanding how “morality” (which is not a matter of beliefs, but attitudes) can be ideological for Marx. I illustrate this analysis with some of Marx’s paradigmatic examples of ideological mistakes and offer an account of Marx’s conception of “interests.”*

**Keywords:** Karl Marx; ideology; interests; Thomas Malthus; Raymond Guess; Friedrich Nietzsche

## Introduction

Someone in the grips of an “ideology,” in the pejorative sense Karl Marx popularized, suffers from false consciousness, as Friedrich Engels and the later Marxist tradition dubbed it.<sup>1</sup> The “ideology” is one part of their general form of consciousness and it is false. A “form of consciousness” for Marx’s purposes is an inferentially—and sometimes just causally—related cluster of beliefs and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Denise Meyerson, *False Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 4. She also correctly notes that the falsity of ideologies is necessarily central for Marx. See Meyerson, *False Consciousness*, 5. Marx himself never offers a systematic account of “ideology,” although he made plenty of remarks that are naturally interpreted as falling under the heading of “ideology.” Meyerson’s illuminating study is more concerned, however, with the psychological mechanisms underlying false consciousness rather than with how it is that ideologies are false.

attitudes<sup>2</sup> that is distinctive of a particular historical and economic epoch,<sup>3</sup> but which also admits of individual variations. As we will see at the end of the section “Marx’s sense of ideology,” falsity is not enough to pick out “ideology” for Marx, but all ideologies are *at least* false and so that is where I begin. Obviously, the ideological form of consciousness involves a mistake, but what kind of mistake?

Ideologies, like all forms of consciousness, can be either tacit or explicit. An example of the former is when newscasters speak of the poor as “unfortunate,” thereby manifesting tacit acceptance of an ideology about socioeconomic relations, according to which the socioeconomic condition in which the “poor” find themselves is a product of “fortune” or “chance” rather than, say, a foreseeable consequence of particular political and economic choices made by others. Of course, a form of consciousness can also be *explicit*. For example, one might explicitly embrace the view that the “poor” suffer from “misfortune,” and that such suffering is necessary and unavoidable if overall social welfare is to be maximized. That latter view is not proprietary to the right. Even egalitarian liberals may agree that, in some cases, the poor are “unfortunate” since they did not luck out in the natural lottery of talents remunerated in capitalist societies.

Ideological forms of consciousness must include beliefs,<sup>4</sup> else they could not be false. Attitudes (desires, urgings, emotions, and so on) cannot be false. They can be frustrated, satisfied, painful, pleasant, conative, and so on, but they are neither true nor false. A form of consciousness is made up of a vast web of beliefs *and* attitudes. One may believe that misfortune explains the condition of the poor and at the same time have certain attitudes toward the fact believed (regret, sadness, approval, and so on). So when we say that the ideological form of consciousness is “false,” we are really only saying that the *beliefs* in that form of consciousness are false. Even that is too strong to be plausible, however. Suppose it is true that the natural lottery of distribution of talents among people does figure in the explanation of poverty. However, suppose also that it is false that it is the primary explanation for the situation of the poor. A liberal egalitarian might accept an ideology about the poor combining both claims. If this ideology is false, it would only be partly false; that is, it would be false with regard to what the “primary” explanation for poverty is.

More generally, only if all beliefs in an ideological form of consciousness stand in strong inferential relations with each other would it turn out that all the beliefs in that form of consciousness are false (or unjustified) just because some of its constituent beliefs are false. Yet it is implausible that most (or any) forms of

---

<sup>2</sup> Attitudes, like desires, can stand in predictable causal relationships with other attitudes and beliefs, but they cannot stand in inferential relations, since they have no cognitive, i.e., truth-evaluable, content.

<sup>3</sup> This is Hegel’s sense of the concept, in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), although Marx, unlike Hegel, thinks that forms of consciousness are explicable by the material circumstances of the epochs in which they arise.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely, *beliefs in propositions*, since only the latter can have truth-values.

consciousness are so tightly interconnected through inferential relations<sup>5</sup>; our actual epistemic situation is one of limits, imperfections, and even contradictions. So when we say that an ideological form of consciousness is false, we are only saying that some central or nodal beliefs in that ideological form of consciousness are false. That is compatible with other beliefs, including those inferentially connected to the false beliefs, being true. For example, even if it is false that “fortune” or “chance” explains poverty, someone who believes that the poor are unfortunate will also believe, truly, that there are poor people, that there is a broader economic context in which they are poor, and so on. Even if the central or nodal belief about the role of fortune in poverty is false, many of the other beliefs in that ideology can still be true.

One particular puzzle I shall address here is how it is Marx can believe that “morality” is ideological, as when he says things like: “Law, morality [*Moral*], religion, are to [the enlightened proletariat] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.”<sup>6</sup> Religion seems to be the easy case here, since religions typically include descriptive claims about the world and its ontology that are demonstrably false (or, at best, unwarranted). Law presents its own complications,<sup>7</sup> but here I want to focus on how moral claims can be mistaken. If we were to attribute to Marx the view that all moral judgments are cognitive (that is, apt for evaluation in terms of their truth and falsity) and the view that there are no objective facts about morality, then he—just as any error theorist about morality—could easily maintain that all moral judgments are mistaken.<sup>8</sup> It is implausible, however, to think that this is what Marx had in mind, even if his generally naturalistic outlook would be consistent with such an approach. I return to this puzzle in the section below on “How ideologies are false (and the case of morality).”

## Ideological mistakes

Raymond Geuss, in a well-known typology,<sup>9</sup> suggests that there are three ways an ideology could be false. An ideology could involve mistakes about: (1) the

<sup>5</sup> A caveat is needed. Ordinary forms of consciousness are not so tightly connected inferentially, but many of Marx’s targets are those he calls “ideologists,” that is, professional purveyors of systematic moral, political, and economic theories. Marx’s critical strategy with some of them, such as David Ricardo, is to argue that even the *ideal* version of their theory would still be ideological in the pejorative sense. In what follows, I am concerned with “folk” ideology rather than with the theories of ideologists. Thanks to Lawrence Dallman for pressing this point.

<sup>6</sup> Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 482. Cf. the critique of Kantian and utilitarian ethics in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 4, ed. Lev Churbanov et al. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 193–97, 243, 409.

<sup>7</sup> See generally, Brian Leiter, “Marx, Law, Ideology, Legal Positivism,” *Virginia Law Review* 101, no. 4 (2015): 1179–96.

<sup>8</sup> The classic contemporary statement is J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977). According to Mackie, moral judgments try to describe objective features of the world, but because there are no objective moral properties of any kind, all such judgments are false.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

“epistemic” properties of the form of consciousness (that is, “mistaking the epistemic status of some of its apparently constituent beliefs”)<sup>10</sup>; (2) the “functional” properties of the form of consciousness (for example, falsely believing that the form of consciousness does not legitimize domination)<sup>11</sup>; and/or (3) the “genetic” properties of the form of consciousness (for example, having false beliefs about the real motives for accepting the form of consciousness).<sup>12</sup> I am not sure that any of these fully capture the pejorative sense of ideology Marx is interested in.

Let us start with Geuss’s “epistemic” sense of ideology, one in which the form of consciousness “mistak[es] the epistemic status of some of its apparently constituent beliefs.”<sup>13</sup> I take it Geuss means to distinguish what we might call the narrowly “epistemic” (that is, the justification or warrant of the belief) from the “semantic” (that is, whether a belief is true or false), even though being false is also an epistemic property of beliefs, because knowledge always requires true belief. If he did not intend this distinction, the “epistemic” sense of ideology would be the overarching sense, because, per hypothesis, all ideologies are false. Thus, we should read Geuss’s category of “epistemic” mistakes in the narrower sense in which the mistake in question is one about the justificatory properties of a belief, such as confusing the justificatory status of different kinds of beliefs. This fits most, but not all, of Geuss’s examples. In particular, it does not fit one of Geuss’s examples of the “epistemic” sense of ideological falseness: “A form of consciousness is ideologically false if it contains a false belief to the effect that the particular interest of some subgroup is the general interest of the group as a whole.”<sup>14</sup>

This last example of ideological falseness is very important for Marx (as we will see), but it looks like a mistake *simpliciter*, not a mistake about epistemic status. The problem here is that the interest of the subgroup is not, *in fact*, in the interest of the group as a whole. Perhaps Geuss’s thought is that the epistemic mistake is in trying to *justify* a claim about the interest of the group as a whole in terms of the interests of a subgroup. Putting aside that this is not how Marx seems to frame the objection, it would also, again, make the “epistemic” sense of ideology too broad. After all, any time I have an apparently *justified* but *false* belief about some topic, I must be making *some* mistake about the justification.

Geuss’s “genetic” sense of ideology is less ambiguous than the “epistemic” sense. On this view, the ideology involves a mistake about “some of its genetic

<sup>10</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 21. Geuss is offering an interpretation of the Frankfurt School, according to which “ideological delusion ... is not an empirical error, of even a very sophisticated kind, but something quite different.” Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 12. Geuss is probably right about the Frankfurt School and he may be right about Marx, depending on what precisely is meant by an “empirical error.” As we will see below, mistakes for Marx about (what I will call) “extrinsic interests” could be empirical errors, but they would depend on a non-empirical error as well about (intrinsic) interests. See the discussion in the section on “Mistakes about interests.”

<sup>13</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 14.

properties, that is, by virtue of some facts about its origin, genesis, or history.”<sup>15</sup> Drawing on the Frankfurt School, Geuss describes ideologies in the “genetic” sense

as systems of beliefs and attitudes accepted by the agents for reasons which they could not acknowledge .... [If] the agents had to recognize and acknowledge that *these* were their motives, they would thereby not only no longer be motivated as strongly as they were to continue to accept the ideology, but they would see that there is *no* reason for them to accept it .... [Thus] the form of consciousness is false in that it requires ignorance or false belief on the part of the agents of their true motives for accepting it.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that a belief may not survive recognition of the real motive is familiar from Freudian psychoanalysis, but it arguably also plays a role in Marx’s theory. Historical materialism reveals that the form of consciousness dominant in a society is one that serves the material interests of the ruling class and that it is dominant precisely for that reason. This kind of mistake is not a primary focus for Marx, although it is relevant to why he thinks that moral claims on behalf of the working class are not ideological, as we will see in the section on “How ideologies are false (and the case of morality).”<sup>17</sup>

### Marx’s sense of ideology

As Jaime Edwards and I argue in other work,<sup>18</sup> there are two central cases of ideology associated with Marx. The first is when an ideological form of consciousness represents what is really only in the interest of a particular economic class<sup>19</sup> as being in the “general interest,” that is, the interest of everyone

<sup>15</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 20–21. As the anonymous referee correctly points out, Geuss’s account of a genetic mistake would allow *ignorance* to suffice for false consciousness. I would think that more is required, namely, that the form of consciousness actually misrepresent the form of consciousness as *not* having a particular origin, even if that misrepresentation were borne of ignorance.

<sup>17</sup> Mistakes about what Geuss calls the “function” of ideology are relevant for Marx only to the extent that they are relevant to what I call, below, mistakes about “extrinsic” interests.

<sup>18</sup> Jaime Edwards and Brian Leiter, *Marx* (London: Routledge, 2024), chap. 5. There are other senses important for Marx (e.g., the mistake of taking ideas to be causally efficacious apart from the material contexts that give rise to them), but I take the two mistakes in the text to be the most interesting cases that do not depend as directly on Marx’s historical materialism. For a more detailed treatment of Marx’s different senses of ideology and the social-scientific evidence that supports it, see esp. Jaime Edwards, “The Marxian Theory of Ideology: A Reconstruction and Defense” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> For purposes here, it will suffice to treat someone’s “class” as a matter of the control they have over the existing productive forces in a society. For example, do they only own their own labor power or do they also own technology and machinery? The dominant class always owns more than its own labor power, sometimes owning outright the labor power of others (as in slave societies) or being able to purchase it to utilize it in conjunction with the technology the dominant class owns (capitalism). For a more detailed discussion, see Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chap. 3.

regardless of class (hereafter the “Interests Mistake”). The second is when it represents social and economic arrangements that are, in fact, contingent and historically specific as though they were necessary (or “natural”) and universal (hereafter the “Necessity Mistake”). Both mistakes operate in the interest of the dominant (or ascendant) economic class in society, so in that sense the notion of interests is fundamental to the critique, as we will see. However, only the first mistake involves a direct mistake about interests, that is, confusing the interests of a specific class with the general interest or the interest of everyone.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx (with Engels) gives apt expression to the Interests Mistake: “For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the context of the French Revolution, the ascendant bourgeoisie had to persuade those who did the physical fighting against the monarchy—namely, the peasants and urban workers—that the formal political principles the bourgeois class supported (for example, personal freedoms, property rights, modest expansion of voting rights) were the purpose of the Revolution and the conditions of *general* emancipation. According to Marx, though, the overthrow of the monarchy and the realization of formal political freedoms only made a difference for the bourgeois class, for they “[emancipate] the whole of society but only provided the whole of society is in the same situation as this class, e.g., possesses money and education or can acquire them at will.”<sup>21</sup> Because the peasants and urban workers were not in that situation, the political emancipation made little difference for them.

A striking example of the Necessity Mistake is Marx’s critique of Thomas Malthus. Malthus purports to explain the necessity for some living in luxury, while most endure lives of miserable toil. First, he argues that the demand for luxury items by the unproductive classes (such as landlords and financiers) is the real motor of the economy and that, therefore, a society’s economic health requires protecting these privileged classes. Second, he argues that any relief offered to the poor would only lead to an increase in the population, which would ultimately undermine any benefits this relief initially provided, thus making things worse. Marx despised Malthus, whom he called a “bought advocate”<sup>22</sup> who provided “a new justification for the poverty of the producers of wealth, a new apology for the exploiters of labour ... [and] a sycophantic service” for the ruling class.<sup>23</sup>

What is *really* objectionable about Malthus’s ideological rationalizations is not their falsity per se (their “Necessity Mistake”), but that they serve to justify economic conditions that are not in the interest of the vast majority. This is quite important for understanding Marx’s sense of ideology. Mistakes are, after all,

<sup>20</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 174. Cf. Marx and Engels, “The Holy Family,” in Churbanov, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 81–82.

<sup>21</sup> Marx and Engels, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” in Churbanov, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 184.

<sup>22</sup> Marx and Engels, “Notes on the History of the Discovery of the So-Called Ricardian Law,” in Churbanov, *Collected Works*, vol. 31, 350.

<sup>23</sup> Marx and Engels, “Notes on the History of the Discovery of the So-Called Ricardian Law,” 347.

common in the cognitive economy of anyone's consciousness, including mistakes about interests and about what is natural and what is not. Many mistakes about the natural world are easy to expose as mistakes about how the world works, even when they are framed in terms of "interests." Consider COVID-19 skeptics who claimed that the virus is no worse than the flu and that vaccines and lockdowns were really in the "interest" of "Big Pharma" and liberal bureaucrats, respectively, who wanted to make money and exercise control. In fact, COVID-19 is far more dangerous than the influenza virus,<sup>24</sup> effective lockdowns reduced the spread of the disease,<sup>25</sup> and vaccines produced massive reductions in death and hospitalization.<sup>26</sup> Even allowing that this is all true, it is also possible that *other* interests were satisfied (for example, making money), but that is compatible with claims about COVID-19 and remedial measures all being true; sometimes, "interests" and truth coincide.<sup>27</sup>

Other purported ideological mistakes, however, depend entirely on the notion of "interests." Consider the idea frequently articulated by Tucker Carlson (formerly of the Fox News network) that existing policies in the United States benefit "elites"—meaning, roughly, cosmopolitan liberals concerned with racism and sexism—while harming "real Americans." According to Carlson, the interest of a particular group (the "liberal elites") is being passed off as being in the general interest ("real Americans"). From a Marxian point of view, the Carlson critique is an instructive example. Marxists will agree with Carlson that the dominant ideology in the United States is in the interest of an "elite," meaning (for the Marxist) those who own the primary means of production and purchase the labor power of others for their livelihood. Carlson, however, understands the "elite" completely differently, excluding owners of capital and including, for example, proponents of diversity, tolerance for sexual and

<sup>24</sup> Shawn Radcliffe, "Here's Why COVID-19 Is Much Worse Than the Flu," *Healthline*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/why-covid-19-isnt-the-flu>.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., "Singapore: COVID-19 LOCKDOWN," *HumSpace*, <https://covid-19.humspace.ucla.edu/case-studies/singapore/>. See also, "Comparative Analysis: COVID-19 LOCKDOWN," *HumSpace*, <https://covid-19.humspace.ucla.edu/case-studies/singapore/>, which analyzes the infection rate after lockdown in Singapore, Japan, and Italy to find that "there is a consistent pattern of decreasing cases during and after the lockdown across all three countries"; Vincenzo Alfano and Salvatore Ercolano, "The Efficacy of Lockdown Against COVID-19: A Cross-Country Panel Analysis," *Applied Health Economics and Health Policy* 18, no. 4 (2020): 509–17, which analyzes international samples with "results show[ing] that lockdown is effective in reducing the number of new cases in the countries that implement it, compared with those countries that do not."

<sup>26</sup> Thiago Cerqueira-Silva et al., "Effectiveness of CoronaVac, ChAdOx1 nCoV-19, BNT162b2, and Ad26.COV2.S among Individuals with Previous SARS-CoV-2 Infection in Brazil: A Test-Negative, Case-Control Study," *The Lancet* 22, no. 6 (2022): 791–801.

<sup>27</sup> Suppose we have the empirical science we have because it is in the interests of the ruling class that we have this empirical science. This is *probably* true; many (maybe all) members of the capitalist class have a powerful economic interest in a correct understanding of the causal laws governing the natural world for obvious reasons, so they have a reason to encourage an epistemically reliable empirical science that gives them the understanding essential for effective productive exploitation of the natural world. Cf. Peter Railton, "Marx and the Objectivity of Science," in *The Philosophy of Science*, ed. Richard Boyd et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 763–74. None of that would have any bearing on the truth of the scientific claims.

religious minorities, and so on. This difference in the understanding of the “elite” is parasitic on a view about “interests.” If what is really in the “interest” of the vast majority are noncosmopolitan, illiberal policies that also protect the interests of the capitalist class, then Carlson is correct. If, however, what is really in the “interest” of the vast majority is the expropriation of private capital and public ownership of the major productive forces in order to meet human needs, then he is wrong.

Notice that the current agenda of the U.S. Democratic Party does not fare well on either account, which is why the Carlson critique can appropriate the Marxian idea of elites misleading others about their interests so easily. The mainstream of the Democratic Party<sup>28</sup> also denies that owners of capital are part of an enemy “elite,” while often attacking those who sell labor power to survive for their sexism, racism, and so on. Contrasting Carlson’s critique of “diversity” with that of Marxian social critics like Walter Benn Michaels<sup>29</sup> and Adolph Reed<sup>30</sup> is instructive in this regard. For these latter critics, “diversity” is not in the interest of the vast majority, because it is compatible with capitalism as long as members of the ruling class represent each demographic interest group in appropriate proportions: for example, 10 percent Black, 20 percent Hispanic, 50 percent women, 5 percent gay, and so on. “Diversity” is a distraction,<sup>31</sup> on this view, from the real harms to the interests of the vast majority that result from the fact that capitalism, on their view, consigns the vast majority—without regard to demographic identity—to wage slavery and ultimately poverty.

I believe that this latter critique of diversity rhetoric is correct, but for our purposes here, one need not agree with that. What is important is that the only way for Marxists to vindicate their claims about ideology is to have views about *real* interests. The only way Carlson can be wrong, and Benn Michaels and Reed can be correct, is if the former is wrong about people’s interests and the latter are correct. The entire Marxian critique of ideology depends on this. Given how many false beliefs everyone has, the only characteristic that can single out an “ideology” is not its falsity, per se, but that its falsity is skewed in a particular way, namely, in a way that favors the “interests” of a dominant economic class at the expense of a much larger subordinate one.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The critiques offered by Senators Bernie Sanders of Vermont and sometimes Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts can sound more like a Marxian critique, but their views are not mainstream and their solutions are decidedly not Marxian. Warren, in particular, expressly avows to be a “capitalist.” See John Harwood, “Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren: ‘I am a capitalist’—but Markets Need to Work for More than Just the Rich,” CNBC, July 24, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/23/elizabeth-warren-i-am-a-capitalist-but-markets-need-rules.html>.

<sup>29</sup> See Walter Benn Michaels, “The Trouble with Diversity,” *The American Prospect*, August 13, 2006, <https://prospect.org/features/trouble-diversity/>.

<sup>30</sup> See Adolph Reed, “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism,” *New Labor Forum* 22, no. 1 (2013): 49–57.

<sup>31</sup> Marx was very interested in what Edwards and I call “distraction ideologies.” Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, 162–64.

<sup>32</sup> Geuss recognizes the centrality of the mistake about *interests* to the concept of ideology: “[A]gents who suffer from ideologically false consciousness are deluded about their own interests.” Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, 45; his own account in Chapter 2 of how this is possible is not helpful, in part because he does not consider “objectivist” views of interests, discussed below in the text.



## Mistakes about interests

For the Marxian sense of ideology to have purchase, it must be conceptually possible to make a mistake about one's interests, and it must be the case that Marx's sense of ideology correctly tracks the *real* interests of the majority. I want to consider only the former requirement here. How people can be mistaken about their interests depends on how one understands the idea of "interests."

To start, we can distinguish between two broad philosophical views of "interests":

- (1) On *subjectivist* views, an agent's interests are constituted by the agent's desires/preferences/attitudes ("desires" for short), either actual or under idealized conditions.
- (2) On *objectivist* views, an agent's desires may provide *evidence* about an agent's interests, but they play no constitutive role; an agent's interests do not depend on an agent's desires, even under ideal conditions.<sup>33</sup>

Most subjectivist views and all objectivist views are compatible with the possibility of an agent being mistaken about his interests. Only one kind of subjectivist view is incompatible with that possibility, namely, the view popular with some economists that an agent's desires (or "revealed preferences") constitute the agent's interests. This is not plausible, however, as a view of an agent's interests, for familiar reasons. Briefly, an agent's desires are hostage to the agent's ignorance and irrationality, which means that satisfying them might be bad for the agent, as the agent himself would recognize were he aware of the problem. The most plausible subjectivist views—according to which an agent's interests are fixed by what the agent would desire under *appropriate* or *ideal* conditions<sup>34</sup>—can easily accommodate the possibility of mistake, because an agent's real interests depend only on desires under conditions that may not actually obtain, in which case they would not know about them.

Objectivist views of interests are all compatible with the possibility of mistake, since what is in an agent's interest does not depend on what the agent desires or feels, on the plausible assumption that agents are not typically mistaken about those mental states. Agents can be unaware of objective facts about their interests, just as they can be unaware of objective facts discovered by physics or biology. Many objectivist views are what Derek Parfit dubs "objective list" views<sup>35</sup> that identify a list of activities, accomplishments, and/or capacities that are constitutive of well-being.<sup>36</sup> What justifies belonging on the list is typically an appeal to intuition or what is purportedly "self-evident." The latter

<sup>33</sup> In recent literature, there are hybrid views, but these need not concern us here.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14, no. 2 (1986): 52, 54–55. I elide differences in their views, which are irrelevant here.

<sup>35</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Authors with very different approaches adopt such views. See, e.g., John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

does not seem to be Marx's view, either early or late. Sometimes, however, the list is justified by appeal to a second objectivist strategy that seems closer to Marx's view. The young Marx (under the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel) was clearly attracted to a kind of Aristotelian argument, according to which an agent's interests consist in the full realization of her essential (natural) capacities. Marx never published his main arguments for this view, recognizing that they were irrelevant to political practice; the capitalist class was not going to abandon its economic system because it is wrong to interfere with human flourishing.<sup>37</sup> The early Marx's developed views on this score (especially in the 1844 *Manuscripts*) are evocative but also not wholly plausible, for reasons that need not concern us here.<sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding this, it seems that throughout his work, including his mature work, Marx presupposes something like an objectivist view, albeit in a thinner sense than in 1844. First, Marx plainly believes that what would precipitate revolutionary resistance to capitalism is the immiseration of most people, that is, the failure of capitalism to meet their "basic needs" for adequate food, clothing, shelter, leisure, and the like.<sup>39</sup> One might think, plausibly, that the latter are set by the basic biological and psychological nature of human beings. Second, and more ambitiously, Marx always presupposes that humans need, by their nature, to engage in productive activity unrelated to the satisfaction of meeting basic needs. In his early work, Marx describes this as "spontaneous activity,"<sup>40</sup> in which a person produces things "even when he is free from physical need."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, humans sometimes "also form things in accordance with the laws of beauty,"<sup>42</sup> that is, simply for aesthetic satisfaction.<sup>43</sup> (The contrast is with

<sup>37</sup> See Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chaps. 4, 6.

<sup>38</sup> See the doubts raised in Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chap. 6. The idea of alienation from "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*) seems especially implausible.

<sup>39</sup> Marx thinks that this is an inevitable result of the logic of the capitalist marketplace, which requires capitalists to reduce costs and increase productivity by investing in technology, which gradually displaces human labor. Because most people have only their labor power to sell, the incentive of capitalists to invest in technology will gradually eliminate the purchasing power for the main consumers of commodities. A widely repeated bit of labor union folklore illustrates the basic Marxian thesis about capitalism. According to the story, Walter Reuther, leader of the United Auto Workers labor union in Detroit, toured a new Ford automotive factory that utilized robots to do tasks previously performed by human laborers. The Ford Company executive leading the tour said to Reuther, "Try to get these robots to pay dues to the labor union!" Reuther replied, "Try to sell them your cars!"

<sup>40</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> The anthropological/archaeological record is replete with examples of how human beings, under multivarious and often adverse circumstances, have produced things purely for aesthetic reasons; think of the cave paintings of Lascaux or the desert paintings in the Sahara and in Australia. (Thanks to Janet Roitman for guidance on this topic.) Independent of the status of the claim as one about fundamental human needs, it certainly articulates an attractive normative ideal. Consider the role that education assigns to opportunities for young people to engage in expressive and aesthetic activity, from painting to make-believe games and so on. It is not clear why adults should be supposed to have no interest in or need for similar activities.

nonhuman animals, which “[produce] only under the dominion of immediate physical need.”<sup>44</sup>) Human beings are, in Marx’s view, *sui generis* not in their ability, but in their *need* to work independently of meeting their basic needs; humans need to satisfy their aesthetic and expressive interests through productive activity. I will refer to these in what follows as “expressive” interests or needs. That is the most important legacy throughout Marx’s corpus of his early attempts to develop an objectivist view about interests.<sup>45</sup>

One might be skeptical, of course, that people could possibly fail to realize that they have an interest in meeting their basic needs. It is perhaps more plausible that people who have been ground down their whole lives by the need to earn wages to survive might not realize they have expressive needs, but then the plausibility of the claim turns on the objectivist assumption that people really have such needs, even if they do not recognize them. If one found objectivism implausible, one could claim, on behalf of Marx, that people would recognize the existence of these expressive interests under better epistemic conditions, but we need not resolve that issue here.

In both cases, however, there is a further important point at stake about Marx’s critique of ideology. Recall that the Interests Mistake involves confusing the general interest with what is only in the interest of a *particular* class. There are two ways to suffer such a confusion: by being confused about intrinsic or extrinsic interests. Intrinsic interests are what we have been discussing; these are objective goods that are either ends-in-themselves for the agent or interests that are essential to survival. Extrinsic interests are the agent’s interests as the means toward realizing their intrinsic interests. *Confusion about extrinsic interests is the dominant modality of Marx’s critique of capitalism.* To put it rather simply, Marx assumes that the immiserated want to satisfy their intrinsic interests, but, thanks to ideology, they mistakenly think their inability to do so under capitalism is due to something other than the economic system in which they live, which is a mistake about extrinsic interests. They mistakenly think that capitalism is in everyone’s interest, when it is only in the extrinsic interest of the ruling class.

Recall Marx’s French Revolution example. On Marx’s telling, the peasants and urban workers who did the physical fighting against the monarch recognized that they were badly off under the monarchy. Their mistake was in thinking that the replacement of the monarchy with bourgeois political liberties would emancipate them. They correctly perceived that the monarchy was not in their (intrinsic) interest, but they were incorrect in thinking that a revolution *only* on behalf of political liberties was *actually* in their (extrinsic) interest.

The same is true of Marx’s example of Malthus’s theory as an instance of the Necessity Mistake. Those who live in conditions of poverty and toil clearly recognize that their basic needs are not being met adequately, and neither Marx nor Malthus denies that. Malthus, however, purports to explain to them why that

<sup>44</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> Would such an interest motivate revolutionary activity in the same way failure to meet basic needs would? That is less clear, although one can see how the idea of “free” labor (rather than “wage slavery”) could be very appealing.

is necessary; the ideology he propagates does not try to convince the miserable that they are not miserable, only that it is *necessary* that they be miserable. Marx derides the latter as mere “ideology.” Malthus falsely represents as necessary a form of socioeconomic organization that is not in the extrinsic interest of the vast majority.

We may say, then, that all ideological mistakes attract Marx’s attention precisely because they adversely affect the intrinsic or extrinsic interests of the majority. Marx is most often, but not exclusively, concerned with mistakes about extrinsic interests.<sup>46</sup> Because mistakes about extrinsic interests are only of concern if the underlying assumptions about intrinsic interests are correct,<sup>47</sup> it is still the case that Marx needs to have room for the idea of mistakes about *intrinsic* interests, which he can have on either an objectivist view or any subjectivist view of interests that imposes epistemic constraints on the desires that are constitutive of the agent’s interests.

### How ideologies are false (and the case of morality)

We can summarize the preceding discussion as follows. For Marx, ideologies are false insofar as they involve mistakes either about people’s intrinsic interests or, more often, their extrinsic interests. Sometimes, the mistake involves confusing the interest of a specific class with the general interest; sometimes, it involves treating as natural and necessary states of affairs that are historically contingent. Because people usually do not make mistakes about their intrinsic interest in meeting their basic needs, the more common mistake is about their extrinsic interest in certain socioeconomic arrangements or strategies as a way of meeting their basic needs. Mistakes about extrinsic interests can involve complicated questions about causation (for example, the effects on intrinsic interests of certain forms of economic organization), but it is clear there can be mistakes about the correct means given an agent’s ends. Given the complexity of the question, it is also easy to see how ideologies can exploit the complexity such that people are mistaken about their extrinsic interests.

With regard to intrinsic interests, it is also easy to see how people could be mistaken about their intrinsic interest in having opportunities for work not related to meeting physical needs, but the plausibility of this critique of ideology turns on how plausible it is to attribute such an interest to most people. I am sympathetic to Marx’s account on this score, but I will not try to defend it here. As already indicated, Marx’s focus is more often on mistakes about extrinsic

---

<sup>46</sup> The Frankfurt School is different on this score because they tend to assume that people have a plethora of “interests” that the capitalist marketplace obscures, including those beyond what I called above the expressive/aesthetic interests. A classic example is Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966). In so-called “Western Marxism” (i.e., Marxism after Lukács and the *1844 Manuscripts*), Agnes Heller’s *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Allison and Bundy, 1976) is an example, but, in my view, a misreading of the mature Marx, for she relies heavily on the unpublished materials of 1844.

<sup>47</sup> A mistake about the means toward ends not worth realizing is not, it seems, a mistake worth caring about.

interests, and that is also what is most relevant to understanding Marx's critique of morality as ideology.

Recall the initial puzzle about the claim that moralities can be ideologically "false." Only *beliefs* can be false, but even if we were to attribute a cognitivist view of moral judgments to Marx (that is, the view that such judgments express beliefs), we would only get the conclusion that moralities are false if we also were to assume that Marx is a kind of error theorist about cognitive moral judgments (that is, that all moral judgments are false because there are no objective moral facts). There is no textual reason for thinking this is what Marx has in mind when he critiques morality as ideological, so we need a different account.

We can assume, fortunately, that Marx is agnostic on the question of whether moral judgments are cognitive or noncognitive if we locate the mistake not in the (referential) *content* of the moral judgments, but in terms of what people believe *about* morality—in particular, what people believe about whether morality is in their extrinsic interest. That is, what is ideological would be the false belief that the predominant morality is in the extrinsic interest of most people.

The case of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of morality is instructive in this regard, since a similar issue arises there. As I have written previously:

"[M]orality" is, in Nietzsche's view, well suited to the great "herd" of mankind, [but] it is, in fact, a danger to those potentially higher human beings who mark any great historical or cultural epoch. Nietzsche's real aim, then, is to free nascent higher types [of human beings] from their "false consciousness," i.e., their false belief that the dominant morality is, in fact, *good for them*.<sup>48</sup>

More precisely, for Nietzsche, the morality that is the target of his critique involves an ideological form of false consciousness only when accepted by "higher human beings," for such a morality is *not*, in fact, in their intrinsic interest in flourishing. Higher human beings, on Nietzsche's account, thus make a mistake about their own extrinsic interests; the morality they accept is, in fact, harmful—not neutral—with respect to their flourishing.

I take it that Marx's basic thought about the ideological character of morality has a similar structure, although he has a very different conception of the affected interest groups: not Nietzsche's "higher human beings" versus the herd, but rather, the ruling class versus the vast majority of those who have only their labor power to sell. Morality is ideological for Marx because it presents itself as "impartial"—that is, as a set of prescriptions and proscriptions that are not in the interest of any particular group, while binding on them all—when, in fact, these prescriptions and proscriptions are only in the interest of the ruling class. When it is widely believed to be "immoral" to violate people's property rights, to interfere with their private decisions in the marketplace, and to infringe on their liberty to contract and bargain, then such a morality is in the interest of the capitalist class because the capitalist class depends on all of the preceding norms

<sup>48</sup> Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 23. Alternatively, their false belief is that this morality is *impartial* between the interests of different types of people.

being reliably observed. The *false* belief is the belief that this morality is neutral as between the extrinsic interests of different economic classes.<sup>49</sup>

That this latter belief is false depends on complicated questions about causation and about how particular economic arrangements ultimately affect people's intrinsic interests. A proponent of capitalism might argue that property rights, markets, and liberty of contract are in everyone's interests because they allow societies to produce more wealth than they would otherwise; in that case, moral norms protecting capitalist economic relations would be in everyone's intrinsic interest. This is a variation on Malthus's argument, but with somewhat more plausible assumptions—indeed, assumptions that Marx accepts to some extent. It is crucial to remember that Marx thinks that capitalism is the most effective instrument for the development of technology and productive power, and that massive productive power is an essential precondition for communism, that is, for an economic system that meets everyone's basic needs and frees them from wage slavery.<sup>50</sup> So when Marx criticizes the morality that legitimates capitalist relations of production, he is doing so on the assumption that capitalism is close to producing the immense productive power that would be necessary for communism. Marx was, in fact, mistaken about the question of timing. Like many nineteenth-century utopians impressed by the massive increase of productive power between 1750 and 1850, he wrongly assumed that technological advances were about to reach a peak, and thus the only real question was whether that enormous productive power would be used to meet human needs and liberate people from "wage slavery" (that is, from having to work only in order to survive). That mistake, however, is irrelevant to the structure of the critique of morality as ideology; morality is ideological in virtue of involving a mistake about extrinsic interests *when it is the case that that morality supports economic relations that are, in fact, not conducive (or no longer conducive) to the realization of the intrinsic interests of the vast majority.*<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The examples of moral principles in the text understate the specificity of moral instruction in the schools in nineteenth-century Europe. In Britain and Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, textbooks inculcated "a view of the world in which moral and economic matters were intrinsically linked" with an eye to "the inculcation of a work ethic into the lower orders." Sandra Mass, "Teaching Capitalism: The Popularization of Economic Knowledge in Britain and Germany (1800–1850)," in *Moralizing Capitalism*, ed. Stefan Berger and Alexandra Przyrembel (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 35. One popular 1828 German textbook on "political economy" "assumed close links between the household, the family, and the state," thus providing a "basis for an overarching social moral compass." Mass, "Teaching Capitalism," 36. Orphans and pauper children, in particular, needed "training in frugality, the inculcation of a work ethic," as well as training in manual labor: "The good education of such children will thus win for society a number of assiduous and morally upstanding citizens in place of the same number of feral idlers." Mass, "Teaching Capitalism," 36–37. (Thanks to Eileen Brennan for the pointer to this text.)

<sup>50</sup> See generally, Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chap. 4.

<sup>51</sup> This way of understanding the critique of morality as ideological entails that whether or not morality is ideologically false depends on whether or not the existing relations of production have or have not exhausted their ability to satisfy the objective interests of most human beings. Marx thought that capitalism had so exhausted itself in the mid-nineteenth century, but he would also surely have agreed that capitalism was in the objective interests of most people as an alternative to feudalism and late-feudal economic arrangements. That would mean that whether or not a morality

## Are Marx's own moral judgments "ideological"?

One virtue of the way of understanding Marx's critique of morality as ideological proposed in the previous section is that it also explains why Marx would not have deemed his own moral judgments to be ideological. It is familiar that Marx makes voluminous moral judgments about capitalism, even though he offers no systematic theory that would justify them; there is no analogue in the Marxian corpus of the Rawlsian theory of justice. Yet Marx still uses morally loaded language in both attacking capitalism and exhorting its victims to action.<sup>52</sup> It is natural to ask why such moral judgments are not also "ideological" in the pejorative sense we have been considering.

The discussion in the previous section suggests the answer. Moral judgments do not involve ideological false consciousness when they do not claim to have a certain kind of impartiality, in particular, when they do not obscure the fact that they represent the interests of a particular class rather than purporting to be in the general interest. Thus, Marx describes "the proletarian movement" as being "in the interests of the immense majority"<sup>53</sup> and he holds that "Communists fight for ... the momentary interests of the working class."<sup>54</sup> Marx derides the German "True" Socialists (one might think, today, of Jurgen Habermas) for thinking that socialism reflects "the requirements of truth; not the interests of the proletariat, but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy."<sup>55</sup> He derides Critical-Utopian Socialists for "consider[ing] themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured."<sup>56</sup> In contrast, he states:

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.<sup>57</sup>

---

is ideologically false is time indexed, i.e., it depends on whether or not the existing economic relations are or are not in the extrinsic interest of most people. Marx does not explicitly discuss this, because he thought at the time he was writing that morality was, in fact, ideologically false. However, I believe that it follows from his general view of economic development that moralities can be "true" at one time and "false" at another. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this important issue.

<sup>52</sup> As Norman Geras writes, "[Marx] often talks of the capitalist's appropriation of surplus-value in terms of 'robbery', 'theft' and the like, which is tantamount to saying that the capitalist has no right to appropriate it and that his doing so is, therefore, indeed wrongful or unjust." Norman Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice," *Philosophica* 33, no. 1 (1984): 43.

<sup>53</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 482.

<sup>54</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 499.

<sup>55</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 494.

<sup>56</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 498.

<sup>57</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 484.

The imperatives of communists thus represent a class-interest-specific morality, one in the interests of the vast majority, as opposed to the ruling class.<sup>58</sup> This morality is *not* ideological, because it is explicitly a set of imperatives in the interest of a particular class: “The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.”<sup>59</sup> Bourgeois morality, of the kind Marx critiques, could also choose to be open about the way in which it is in the interest of only one class, but of course if it did so, no one would accept it. The appeal to class-neutrality is essential to the effectiveness of bourgeois morality as ideology.<sup>60</sup>

One might wonder, however, why these kinds of Marxian imperatives count as “morality,” since they are, explicitly, neither impartial nor universal. Marx’s conception of “morality,”<sup>61</sup> I suggest, is closer to that of anthropologists than that of contemporary, ahistorical moral philosophers. “Morality” regulate relations between people in a community, and thus are different from simple norms of prudence (for example, what would be in an agent’s interest). Yet “moral” norms about what ought to be done are not indifferent to the well-being of the community as a whole, even as they place restrictions on the pursuit of immediate self-interest by individuals. Marx’s plausible thought, I take it, is that as long as there are competing economic classes locked in a struggle for survival, then the only “moral” norms governing human interactions will, in fact, be class-interest specific. More precisely, we can say that while everyone can see there is a difference between self-interested or prudential norms (for example, “Dress warmly when it is cold out lest you get sick!”) and other-directed or “moral” norms (for example, “Don’t harm others”), in societies riven by class divisions, most (if not all) of the supposedly other-directed “moral” norms actually are “class-prudential” norms, that is, their benefits are conferred mostly on one economic class in society. If that is correct, then the pretense that morality could be “impartial” in a society divided by economic classes is itself an instance of ideological false consciousness.

One might reasonably worry that the explicit partiality of Marx’s moral judgments means that he can countenance the morality of, for example, torturing members of the ruling class, as long as it is in the interests of the vast

---

<sup>58</sup> On the objectivist view, everyone has an interest in meeting their basic needs and enjoying opportunities for spontaneous activity; that is a nonmoral judgment about people’s interests. Marx thinks that it is in the collective self-interest of the vast majority to replace capitalism with communism. Marx does not claim that, e.g., capitalists morally ought to prefer capitalism to communism just because it is in the objective interest of the vast majority.

<sup>59</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 482.

<sup>60</sup> This is related to the respect in which the genetic mistake, discussed in the section on “Ideological mistakes,” is relevant for Marx.

<sup>61</sup> Two common words in German are translated as morality: *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. Without going into great detail, the former is something like “the customary or communal morality,” while the latter is something more akin to the moral law, per Immanuel Kant, that the rational individual imposes on himself and that aspires to the impartiality of universality. Marx shares Hegel’s skepticism about the Kantian conception, while viewing *Sittlichkeit* (unlike Hegel) as nothing more than an ideology emanating from the existing economic relations of a society.



majority.<sup>62</sup> The implicit consequentialist style of reasoning employed by many Marxists notoriously might seem to condone any means to achieve desired ends.<sup>63</sup> Marx himself is silent on these kinds of questions, in part because he did not think them relevant in a context in which millions of people led lives deformed by mindless work, poverty, and hopelessness. Marx also believes that communist revolution would only occur when the productive power of society was so great and the vast majority were so immiserated (because their labor power had long been discarded in favor of technology), that the intolerable nature of the situation would be obvious. It is clear that under such circumstances Marx would have had no moral or strategic objection to violence.<sup>64</sup> It is equally clear that Marx, given his abiding concern with the physical and psychological well-being of human beings, would not have assented to gratuitous cruelty toward other human beings.<sup>65</sup>

If Marx is right (as I think he is) that all moralities are historical products and that they inevitably reflect the class structure of the societies in which they arise,<sup>66</sup> then people's "moral intuitions" about violent acts—indeed, any acts—will be colored by their historical and social situation. Cruelty to the proletariat is roundly ignored in capitalist societies and cruelty to the bourgeoisie, one may expect, will be roundly ignored in revolutionary situations. Judgments of morality are situated through and through, at least in class society, according to Marx. That may explain the willingness of capitalists to condone the misery of the masses and it may also explain the willingness of revolutionaries to condone cruelty toward the ruling class. Marx is not interested in the question of what is "morally right" or "morally wrong" in such situations. That some academics will view this as a failure on Marx's part is, on his account, a reflection of their class position. That is, because they are not immiserated and not struggling to survive, they feel free to pass judgment on the actions of others under extreme circumstances.

<sup>62</sup> Thanks to Colin Bird for pressing this kind of question.

<sup>63</sup> An extreme—and embarrassing case—is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's rationalization of Stalinist terror (in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* [Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1947]) as being necessary to bring about a more humane future. Where to locate Merleau-Ponty's mistake is a more difficult question. Those who believe in inviolable moral rights have an easy explanation for where he goes wrong; he thinks that these rights can be traded off for beneficial consequences, when they cannot. But this is not a line of reasoning likely to be attractive to Marx or Marxists. Yet the latter still have an obvious objection to Merleau-Ponty, namely, his unfathomable assumption that Stalinism was a step toward realizing a more humane future. This myopia of the moment (France in the 1940s) is truly astonishing. Josef Stalin was a gangster (hence his utility to the revolutionary movement early on, and Vladimir Lenin's eventual souring on him) and clearly a sociopath once in power. Even putting that to one side, any orthodox Marxist should have acknowledged that agricultural Russia should have adopted capitalist relations of production, not socialized ones. See Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chaps. 2, 4. The Soviet Union was already a mistake from a Marxian point of view, and only Merleau-Ponty's parochial historical parameters led him, like other French Marxists, to miss the obvious.

<sup>64</sup> See Edwards and Leiter, *Marx*, chap. 3.

<sup>65</sup> The whole *raison d'être* of his opposition to capitalism was to improve well-being and render people free.

<sup>66</sup> A point on which Nietzsche, ironically, agrees. See Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 161.

Another consequence of Marx's view about the situated partiality of moral judgments is that the ethical imperatives of the communist movement would not necessarily reflect the morality of a communist society, that is, one without different economic classes and thus one in which the intrinsic interests of everyone would be the same qua human beings. What morality would be like in such circumstances is something that will have to be discovered in the course of historical developments, because, as Engels says, "all moral theories have been ... the product ... of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time."<sup>67</sup> Only under communist relations of production would individuals discover the morality appropriate to a classless society.

## Conclusion

I have argued that, for Marx, ideologies are false insofar as they involve either a mistake about intrinsic or extrinsic interests. Marx, even in his mature work, appears to accept a kind of objectivist view of intrinsic interests, partly grounded in biological and psychological facts about human needs, but he also imputes to humans a need for productive activity responsive to the expressive and aesthetic interests humans have rather than motivated by the need to survive. The most common kind of ideological mistake Marx critiques, however, does not concern a mistake about intrinsic interests, but rather, a mistake about extrinsic interests—in particular, about the forms of socioeconomic organization and actions that are really conducive to realizing the intrinsic interests of human beings. The plausibility of this critique thus turns on complex questions of causation, such as "How do different forms of economic organization affect the realization of people's intrinsic interests?" That is also true of Marx's critique of morality as ideological because the crux of that critique is that morality legitimizes and supports economic relations that are not conducive to realizing the intrinsic interest of the majority (those who have only their labor power to sell in the market). I have not here tried to answer questions about socioeconomic causation, but only to make clear how it is that ideologies *can* be false, for Marx, and what is involved in assessing that claim.

**Acknowledgments.** An earlier version of this essay benefitted from discussion with the other contributors to this volume; from written comments by Lawrence Dallman, David Schmitz, Sara Wexler, and an anonymous referee for this journal; and from discussion with students in my University of Chicago seminar on Marx and twentieth-century Marxism. I am grateful to Peter Povelonis for research assistance.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

---

<sup>67</sup> Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 726. Engels was not always consistent on this point, however.