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Ideology, Equity, and Structure: Comments on Tzu-wei Hung's 'Equity and Marxist Buddhism'

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ABSTRACT

In his essay, 'Equity and Marxist Buddhism', Tzu-wei Hung argues that Marxist Buddhism brings a commitment to social justice together with a distinctive form of virtue theory. In my commentary, I raise several questions from a Marxian perspective: (1) Might it be argued that Marxist Buddhism is (in the critical sense) ideological (similar to religion) because the spiritual goal of 'transcendence' distracts us from the need to fight for emancipation? (2) Can justice as equity be achieved by promoting individual altruism? (3) Aren't both mainstream accounts of justice and Marxist Buddhism aspirational and so need to rely on non-ideal theory to achieve justice?

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1. Introduction

Professor Tzu-wei Hung's paper 'Equity and Marxist Buddhism' illuminates how Marxist Buddhism brings together ideas from Marxism and Mahayana Buddhism to yield a valuable approach to social justice. Hung's discussion offers historical context in explicating the origins of Marxist Buddhism in Taiwan and addresses several challenges that appear to arise when attempting to combine Marxism and Buddhism. I am not a specialist on Buddhism or Marxist Buddhism, so although I will raise some questions about the view that emerges in the proposed integration, I am well aware that there are many additional resources in both the Marxist and Buddhist traditions that might be drawn upon to elaborate and defend Hung's position. It is an honour to be invited to reflect on the issues raised by the paper and I hope my thoughts and queries are helpful.

Hung considers three main issues where it might seem that there is a conflict between Marxism and Buddhism that may raise doubts about the feasibility of an integration of the two views, and develops several more specific questions:

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- (1) Is there sufficient commonality in the basic ontology of the social world?
 - Is the materialism of Marxism compatible with the idealism of Buddhism?
 - Is religion compatible with Marxian emancipation?
- (2) Is there a shared understanding of justice?
 - Is the Buddhist conception of equality compatible with a Marxian understanding of equality?
 - What is distinctive of Marxist Buddhism's approach to justice?
- (3) Do the views agree on how can we promote justice in our activities?
 - Should we aim (primarily) to change individuals or change structures?
 - Should we assume that the state is the site or source of justice?

I will not discuss Hung's answers to all of these questions in full detail, but I will respond to some of the main ideas and touch on others.

2. Materialism, Marxism, and Religion

To consider some of the issues of social ontology, let's start with religion. Perhaps Marx's most famous quotes about religion is this:

The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx 1843/1970: 131)

The idea seems to be that religion provides us an outlet for the pain we suffer under oppressive conditions, and as such, is a plea for better conditions. But the plea, according to Marx, is not directed at the actual source of our pain, namely capitalism, but at a God who promises relief in an afterlife. As a result, believers are willing to endure their suffering based on false promises, and do not take action against injustice. In short, religion provides space to complain, but quiets and soothes believers with lies. This is typical of ideology: ideology misrepresents the world in a way that motivates us to participate in an unjust system, or at least blocks our critical insights from motivating us to address the issues.¹

Hung argues that there is no tension between Marx's ideas concerning religion and Marxist Buddhism, because Marxist Buddhism does not depend on a belief in God and, moreover, Marx's ideas were used to critique Buddhism. However, Hung also suggests that Buddhism is a 'philosophy of transcendence' (2024: 322). What exactly does this mean? Does Buddhism provide a way to transcend our current pains and pleasures to achieve a higher, possibly more serene, state? Does the state of transcendence motivate us to fight injustice? A worry is that Marx's critique of religion is an instance of a more general critique of ideology, and even if Marxist Buddhism does not rely on God, and even if it has some self-critical potential, it may still be ideological, that is, it may offer an understanding of the world that allows us to tolerate injustice that we should not tolerate.

In light of this, it would be helpful to have a clearer sense of the 'transcendence' that defines Marxist Buddhism. Hung argues that Marxist Buddhism is compatible with a recognition of the material world and its failures; it is not an idealism that denies the

¹ Marx's text is clearly more complicated and deserves a more careful reading than I have provided here. See, e.g., Wills (2019).

reality of our material conditions. For example, Lin Qiu-wu was opposed to the entanglement of Buddhism with the ruling class and urged an evolution of Buddhism ‘that was suitable for the general public (proletariat) and to build a new culture that could enrich their social and cultural life’ (322). Hung quotes Xiao Zhijun, ‘We shall not expect the pure land afterlife and forget to build the present pure land. To save today’s situation from the cold, dark and turbid waters, we Buddhists must unite and bravely march on the front line of a faith revolution’ (1927: 62). So according to Marxist Buddhism, human social and cultural life would appear to be materially real, so a full-scale idealism is rejected.

But what is the spiritual aim of Marxist Buddhism? Hung seems to suggest that at least one important goal is to recognize that spirit and matter can be integrated in ‘the entity of emptiness’ (323)? And how is this recognition related to the struggle for justice? Is a recognition of emptiness way to transcend the demands of justice? Can the belief that the world is fundamentally empty motivate social and economic revolution? Why even strive to create the ‘present pure land’ (as opposed to the ‘pure land afterlife’) if, ultimately, the world is empty? I would love to know more because I still find a tension between the spiritual ontology of emptiness and the justice demands arising from material reality.

3. Equity and Justice

Hung suggests that another possible source of conflict between Marxism and Buddhism is in their different understandings of social equity or justice. According to Hung,

Marxist Buddhism’s notion of equity, as a first approximation, holds that all sentient beings are equal and born with the same Buddha-nature; however, due to various constraints of reality (for example, greed, bullying, attachment, and the law of the jungle), it is difficult to achieve an ultimately equal status. Therefore, it is essential to practice the altruism of primitive Buddhism to help and unite with other powerless people to redistribute social resources. (325)

Thus, it seems that on a Marxist Buddhist account, a just society is one in which all have equal social status in keeping with our equal moral worth. We achieve this by practicing altruism and giving to those less fortunate. In particular, Hung continues, ‘the Pure Land conforms to the socialist slogan of *from each according to his ability, to each according to his need*’ (326).

But what is the relationship between equity and justice? There is something right about Hung’s point that formal equality is insufficient for both Marxism and Buddhism and substantive equity is needed. But is equity sufficient for justice on either view? It is a significant challenge, if justice is a matter of need satisfaction, to specify what should count as a need. This is relevant because, on Marx’s view our needs evolve, given that human nature is dynamic rather than fixed (Wills 2024: Ch. 3). How does Marxist Buddhism accommodate this?

The principle of equity is usually considered a principle of *distributive* justice: how do we distribute the goods that society produces. And the Marx quote is concerned with distributive justice. But distributive justice is only one part of justice, and many complain that it is not helpful to focus simply on distributional principles. For example, Iris Young (1990) argues that accounts of justice must take structures into account and emphasizes the domination and oppression of social groups as sites of injustice, for example, in exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural

imperialism, and systemic violence. Elizabeth Anderson (1999) argues that the point of equality is relational not distributional and defends a democratic egalitarianism that prioritizes equality in civic relations between individuals. So the focus on equity in distribution as the core principle of justice leaves out much of what seems to be at stake in social justice.²

Moreover, it is hard to find in Marx the idea that the struggle for social justice is best achieved by promoting the virtue of altruism so that we each promote equal status for all. Capitalism, on his view, is not just an inequitable system. It is one that degrades human existence and makes us less than we might be.

... all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his lifetime into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. (Marx 1867/1976 Ch. 25, section 4)

Marx was committed to a society in which we could all be actively engaged in fully co-realizing our dynamically evolving potential (see Wills 2019). The core objective of our struggle for social justice is emancipation, not equal needs satisfaction or equal status. Of course, it may be that we should be working towards a society in which the possibility of emancipation is equitably distributed. But equity of needs satisfaction is not equity of emancipation.

I raise these questions because although some form of equity is important to Marx, it would be wrong to characterize his vision of justice as a matter of equity or a matter of virtue. Marx's approach to social change is not to cultivate individual virtue, or at least not the virtue of altruism, although Marx values solidarity. Hung points out that Buddhism too, is 'not about personal liberation but the liberation of all human beings' (326). But does Marx, and Marxist Buddhism, focus on the collective in the same way and for the same reasons?

From Hung's account, Marxist Buddhism requires us to focus on the good of all, and not just our individual good, because we seek equity, and the proper means to equity is the exercise of individual virtue of altruism; those who have more give to those who have less until we reach equity. However, for Marx, *collective emancipation* rather than equity is the goal, and we must work collectively, in solidarity with others, because we are, by nature, social animals. We only exist as (social) individuals through a process of differentiation in relationships and, more specifically, through our joint labor. The process of social interaction has direct effects on what is possible for us because our nature is not 'given' but is dynamically created through this interaction. In other words, humans can only realize their nature and achieve emancipation with others, because our nature evolves through our joint labor. So it is not metaphysically possible to achieve emancipation alone because human nature itself is a

² Note that equity in satisfaction of needs may, on some accounts, still leave us with an unjust society, if certain needs are disregarded across the board. If distributional equity is achieved, but one group is denied protection of bodily integrity, for example, there is equity, but no justice. The protection of bodily integrity is a right and is not best understood as a matter of equitable distribution.

relationally constituted.³ So both the aim and the means to achieve justice in Marxism seem quite different from what Hung finds in Marxist Buddhism.

4. Agency, Structures, and the State

Hung argues that there are several advantages to Marxist Buddhism's approach to justice over utilitarianism, deontology, and feminism. He suggests that, in contrast to the virtue ethics approach of Marxist Buddhism, these alternative 'mainstream' views rely on a conception of rights and duties that fall within the purview of the state to protect. The state, however, is inadequate, for it is not always reliable. So justice requires a different approach.

[Marxist Buddhism] highlights the importance of cultivating personal virtue and assigns the responsibility for social progress to each social member instead of passively relying on political elites in a representative democracy to change unjust social structures. This view is quite different from that of deontology and other mainstream definitions ... (327)

I am a bit puzzled by this argument, for virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism are not theories about how to *bring about* justice, but are instead theories about what *constitutes* justice, for example, by virtue of what is a practice, policy, institution, or state just. 'Mainstream' political theorists would completely agree that the state often fails to achieve what it should and elites can't be relied on to fix it. In such cases, both individual resistance and collective action are important. It is also confusing to suggest that feminists are committed to state solutions (327). Quite the contrary, feminists have traditionally urged that 'the personal is political' and urge individuals to undertake resistance in their everyday relationships.

Admittedly, there is some connection between one's account of what justice is and strategies for how one might go about achieving it. For example, if justice is a virtue, then a crucial part of achieving justice is, plausibly, to cultivate individual virtue. But what is the relationship between justice in society and individual virtue? Plato argued in *The Republic*, for example, that to achieve individual virtue one must be part of a just (or virtuous) society, because some virtues are essentially relational and require one to perform one's proper role in the broader structure. Justice in the state and justice in the soul mirror each other. If the society is badly organized, one cannot achieve individual virtue and flourish. On Plato's view, individual virtues and social virtues are co-constituting.⁴ But it doesn't follow that efforts to achieve justice should focus on each individual cultivating virtue; it may be that the most important step is to create a just social structure within which individuals can achieve virtue. Moreover, a virtue theoretic account of justice may not, in practice, be sensitive to the marginalized or oppressed, even if it recommends altruism. It is not uncommon for those who espouse virtue to blame individuals, or groups of individuals, who are oppressed for their bad character because they cannot achieve virtue when they are struggling to simply manage under the yoke of racist, sexist, and capitalist practices.

I'm making two separate points here. First, political theory and political practice are rarely in sync. This is not always the fault of the political theory. One can affirm a

³ Vanessa Wills' excellent book *Marx's Ethical Vision* (2024) spells out in detail the conception of Marx's normative vision that I've relied on in this section.

⁴ I take both this Platonist view, and the Marxian view of emancipation, to be importantly different from the idea that justice is about achieving equity through individual altruism.

political theory aspirationally and seek to improve material conditions to achieve the ideal it recommends. Virtue theory, like other moral and political theories, is aspirational. In this respect, Marxist Buddhism's virtue account of justice is no better off than other accounts. Second, both Marxist Buddhism and 'mainstream' theories require individual agents to promote justice. Even Rawls (1963; 2005: 19) suggests that his model of justice as fairness depends on citizens having a *sense of justice*, that is, the capacity and will to act in accordance with fair terms of cooperation, providing others do so as well. This, one might argue, is a kind of social virtue. Presumably, this also involves an ability to recognize when the terms of cooperation are unfair, and in some cases this will prompt intervention. The state doesn't create or enforce itself. Like the Marxist Buddhist conception of justice, it depends on the actions of individuals who constitute it. In these respects, it is not clear how Hung's arguments show that a Marxist Buddhism that promotes individual virtue is preferable to alternative "mainstream," or even other virtue theoretic, accounts of justice.

But perhaps I have misrepresented Hung's view, for later in his paper he maintains that 'social reform is more crucial than personal practices for building the Pure Land in this world' (331) and that

Marxist Buddhism reasonably advocates structural intervention rather than cognitive intervention. Since people's spirits are determined by their social conditions (e.g., economic and political power structures), by targeting the social classes rather than an individual's idea, one may identify and eliminate the cause of a certain discrimination. (332)

I find it puzzling, however, how this approach is compatible with the idea that

... everyone should rely on the individual self to effect change. Each altruist agent can help oppressed persons and affect the mentality of the dominant groups (for example, by spreading Dharma to awaken people from greed). (328)

As Hung notes, both structural and individual change are required. And the two aims are compatible—social justice efforts can undertake both structural and individual change at the same time. But structural change cannot be achieved individually, even by virtuous agents. It requires collective action. We need more than virtue to create justice. Whether we should prioritize individual or collective action would seem to be a matter of context: what exactly is the problem we are trying to address, who is involved, what history has led up to this problem, what are our options, for example, what sort of power do we have? In short, how does the prioritization of structural change affirmed in section Four of the paper fit with the emphasis on the individual virtue (specifically altruism) elsewhere in the paper?

5. Conclusion

By Hung's account Marxist Buddhism brings an important commitment to social justice together with a distinctive form of virtue theory. Although it might seem that Buddhism is incompatible with key elements of Marxism, Hung argues that the tensions can be resolved and that the result is a compelling view that should be preferred to contemporary accounts of justice.

I've raised several questions about Hung's discussion. In particular, might it be argued that Marxist Buddhism is ideological (in a way similar to religions) insofar as the spiritual goal of 'transcendence' distracts us from the need to fight for

emancipation? Is the conception of justice as equity, allegedly achieved by promoting individual altruism, really what Marx is aiming for in the fight for social justice? Shouldn't we acknowledge that the account of justice in Marxist Buddhism is as aspirational as the mainstream accounts, and don't they all need both a theory of what justice consists in *and* a theory of how to achieve it? And what does Marxist Buddhism really say about whether structural intervention through collective action or individual virtue should be prioritized? (And why think either should be prioritized, in general?) I look forward to the ongoing conversation, for I have much more to learn about Marxist Buddhism.

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