

## Marx's Ethical Vision

Vanessa Christina Wills

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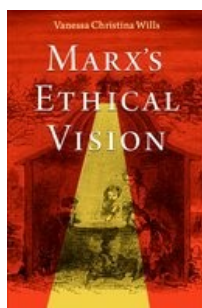
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# Preface

Vanessa Christina Wills

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When the United States invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003, I was a philosophy graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. I was preparing myself for a career as what Karl Marx might have called a “bourgeois ideologist.” Of course, I simply called it “training to be a moral philosopher.”

At that point in my life, I believed the liberal, capitalist institutions that ruled the world were more or less well-equipped and qualified to do so; I thought all they really needed were more smart people with good ideas about how to make the world a better place. I did not think them perfect—far from it. But neither did I expect that far from navigating humanity out of crisis, they would needlessly plunge us into one. And so you could say I had my own crisis of liberal faith. It became suddenly clear to me that “freedom,” “reason,” “rights,” and “humanitarian intervention” were not what they seemed. Our leaders were not acting rationally and they were clearly not acting as though they had the interests of humanity in mind.

Amidst this uncertainty, I was sure of one thing: the invasion of Iraq, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the so-called war on terror as a whole, were grave moral wrongs. So I threw myself into local antiwar activism; this would be the first context in which I ever met socialists. Today, to be an open socialist is hardly uncommon; but in 2003, it was still widely regarded as incredibly anachronistic and passé to admit to being a Marxist.

I noticed that the Marxists seemed almost preternaturally steadfast in their commitment to political struggle and building mass movements. I grew more interested in knowing what it was they thought about the world that led them to have this steadfast disposition. And so I became increasingly intrigued by the ideas of Karl Marx.

Reading Marxist theory offered me a theoretical framework that would explain the bizarre death drive of the imperialist war on terror. I could get the idea that we lived in a system that prioritized private accumulation over the well-being of people. But I did not feel much closer to a theoretical argument to support my conviction that this was objectively morally wrong. I wanted to know, what did a Marxist theory entail about the nature of morality? The answers I encountered in my studies did not satisfy me, either because they were overly naive and uncharitable about liberal morality or because they simply did not offer a thorough enough

interpretation of the full massive scope of Marx's writings on the subject. So I changed my topic of academic study and made this my project: to articulate, as fully as possible, a distinctively Marxist approach to ethics.

In the intervening years, I have written from a Marxist perspective on topics including race, gender, atheism, false consciousness, admiration, policing, political violence, and more. Much of the brutal fallout I and others predicted would come from the war on terror has indeed come to pass. The United States' 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan revealed the whole endeavor as a cruel ruse. It is not "freedom" and "democracy" that the US has left behind in its wake, but rather profiteering adventurism and casualties of war. Meanwhile, fascist movements are on the rise worldwide, sprouting like mushrooms in the fetid soil of racism and imperialism that capitalist wars require.

Still, especially as an enduring response to the 2008 Great Recession, interest in left ideas is greater than it has been in many decades. In the 2000s, my project was regarded as quaint yet decidedly quixotic. Today, it is clearer that this effort was prescient. Working-class struggle is on the rise. There is much more widespread clarity regarding the dim prospects that our current way of doing things can lead us out of crisis, especially as the world faces the twin disasters of climate change and the still-ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic with its terrifying revelations about the world's unpreparedness to manage public health emergencies in a rational and humane way.

My reasons for doing this work are several. They include my own endless scholarly curiosity about this book's topic and my desire to contribute to the broader scholarly understanding of ethics and of Marx's place in the history of philosophy in particular. But I also do this work in order to give courage to revolutionaries, in and out of the academy.

We humans under capitalism are inundated in ideology that seeks to lull us into complacency about social ills or worse, to seduce us into perpetuating them. We are subjected to countless and relentless attempts to convince us that this is all there is and that "there is no alternative." We are told that we must respect the liberty of our oppressors and exploiters to grind us under. If my book has a single message, it would be this:

p. xi    If you think that another world is possible . . . if you think that this is not how we are supposed to live . . . if you think that human beings are so much more than what we appear to be today . . . if you think that we ought to take up the struggle against all conditions that demean us, that turn us against one another, and that squander our precious creative human potential . . . you are right.

Washington, DC

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## 1

## Introduction

Between the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of Lehman Brothers, if the Anglophone academy could be said to have arrived at any consensus about the value of Marxist theory, it would be that Marxism was a quaint historical curio at best and a world-historically hubristic folly at worst.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, well on our way through the first half of the twenty-first century, we live in a moment of greatly renewed interest in Marxist ideas. This curiosity is stoked by, among other factors, the worldwide economic shocks of 2008 and, in more recent times, by impending climate catastrophe, incipient fascisticization, and the still-ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Any of these on its own would stand out as a rebuke to the neoliberal triumphalism of the 1990s, famously crystallized in Francis Fukayama's assertion that humanity had arrived at "the end of history," there to find permanently expanding capitalist prosperity.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, they present at least strong *prima facie* evidence for what Karl Marx identified as the inherently and ineluctably crisis-ridden nature of capital and, therefore, good reason to encounter his writings anew.

The time is ripe to challenge the core assumptions of our age and to analyze how and why it might be that all has not been as it seemed; the time is ripe, in other words, for gadflies.<sup>4</sup> And yet if in 1845 Karl Marx thought it necessary to remind philosophers that the point is to *change* the world, he might be astonished to survey our current state of affairs and find many philosophers unsure as to whether it is even within our remit to *interpret* it.<sup>5</sup>

This book is one small attempt to take up the questions of our age. My project in the following pages is, first of all, to offer a critical reconstruction of Marx's approach to ethical critique of what is; second, to show how that approach relates to, and troubles, a host of still-dominant assumptions about the character, role, and content of ethical theory; and third, to demonstrate how such a perspective can improve both our theories about the world and our attempts to make the world better.

I write from the point of view of those who have become convinced that there is something—perhaps many things—deeply *ethically* wrong with the

current arrangement of our social world and who suspect that the root of this wrong is to be found in the ways that we as human beings collectively produce and reproduce our lived, material conditions of existence within circumstances shaped by the logic of capital. If our crumbling world is one that we have brought about through the sum of our activity as a species, then perhaps some glimmer of hope remains that we might remake it in the image of our fully realized selves.<sup>6</sup>

And yet to be both a Marxist and an ethicist is a stance rife with tension; it is Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, who write, in what was posthumously published as their *Critique of the German Ideology*, that “the Communists do not preach morality at all.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Marx famously seems to call for the abolition of morality altogether. And yet Marx’s writings are shot through with what certainly seem like normative, distinctly ethical evaluations of people, actions, regimes, economies, and political states of affair. “Vampire,” “serpent,” “barbarous”—these are only a few of the unflattering descriptions Marx applies to capital and, notably, these all occur in his later writings, supposed by many of his interpreters to be his most thoroughly *amoral*.<sup>8</sup>

This situation presents a handful of interpretive possibilities. Perhaps, as G. A. Cohen and Allen Wood suggest, Marx incongruently, and in spite of himself, held ethical commitments that were untenable and incompatible with his materialist, deterministic claims about the lawlike development of history. Or perhaps, as argued by Louis Althusser and Daniel Brudney, Marx’s earlier humanistic writings should be thought of as youthful romantic inclination, which Marx took to be superseded by later works after his “Theses on Feuerbach,” which in turn are taken to represent a mature and distinctly amoralist view. Or, perhaps Marx’s tendency to ethical expression betrayed his own sentiment that his theory required an ethical dimension which it lacked: one that could be supplied by Kantian ethics, as suggested by Eduard Bernstein, Max Adler, and Philip Kain, among others. Or still yet, perhaps Marx had no overarching ethical picture to offer, but instead endorsed a radical historicism of the type Cornel West attributes to him in his 1991 book on the subject, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*.<sup>9</sup>

I adopt none of these approaches to understanding Marxism’s ethical dimensions (or lack thereof), although each has something to recommend it. I argue instead that Marx’s writings reveal a single, coherent ethical perspective that evolves and deepens over the course of his intellectual life.<sup>10</sup> This perspective is always rooted in the aim to develop human beings’ capacity to

intervene rationally and purposively into their natural and social conditions of existence. Such agency over the production of their life circumstances would allow human beings to create those conditions conducive to the in-principle limitless proliferation of human talents, capacities, and diverse forms of life—to the emergence of “rich individuality.” He describes this latter concept in the 1857 *Grundrisse*, an unpublished manuscript in which Marx asserts the desirability of

the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one.<sup>11</sup>

About this, I will have more to say in Chapter 6, where I discuss the role of individuality in forming a central, defining element of Marx’s ethical perspective. Here, I will say a bit about the reasons for interesting ourselves in Marxism’s ethical dimensions, at all.

### **Why Think About Marx and Ethics?**

What I offer here is an explication of Marx’s own ethical positions as expressed in his writings over the course of his life—from his youthful philosophical poetry up through his magnum opus, *Capital*. It is also an elucidation of his oft-misunderstood and often quite illuminating critiques of other moral theories and of bourgeois morality as a whole. But as students of Marx will already be aware, any attempt to explain the ethical content of Marx’s philosophy cannot be simply a faithful rendering or summation of views on the matter already plainly stated by him. So my project is not only to highlight and clarify aspects of Marxist theory that often go unrecognized or misunderstood. It is, crucially, to offer a critical reconstruction of Marx’s approach to ethics, one that is as fully consistent with and grounded in Marx’s writings as possible.

Although Marx had significantly more of substance to say about ethics than he is generally given credit for, it is also true that he left behind explanations of his historical materialist method, analyses of the commodity-form that remain unmatched in their breadth and detail, manuscripts on mathematics,

and even the satirical and surprisingly lengthy *Heroes of the Exile*, in which he relates, in comic pastiche, the experiences of exiled participants in Germany's 1848 uprising. At the end of his life, Marx intended a study of the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's findings and their implication for the materialist conception of history that he and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, described in what was posthumously published as their *Critique of the German Ideology*.<sup>12</sup> (Engels would later continue this study of Morgan's work and publish it as *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.)

Danny Goldstick states the case very plainly in his 2022 article "Marx, Marxism, Ethics": "You are not going to get a treatise on normative ethics from Karl Marx."<sup>13</sup> In fact, Marx seemed to make time for almost anything and everything *but* to craft a sustained treatment of a distinctively Marxist, historical materialist approach to ethics. So why is it that nearly two centuries later, Marx's interpreters (such as myself) persist in attempting to piece one together on his behalf?

There is no transcendent answer to the question "Why concern ourselves with ethics?" I will not offer one in the course of this book. Ethics concerns questions about what we ought to do, how we ought to live, and how we ought to treat one another. For communists, that "ought" is intrinsically connected to a conception of the essential nature of human beings and the conditions of our flourishing. There is no "something higher" than human beings, no greater cause, value, or power in service to which we dedicate our minds, bodies, creativity, and time. To be a communist is to seek to approach the world from the perspective of the species and to adopt the active furtherance of humans' well-being and creative potential as one's subjective aim.

In capitalist society, this is an inherently ethical posture. Most people do not live in a society that is organized so as to simply produce individuals who recognize themselves as human and recognize all that is human as one with themselves. Quite the contrary: in capitalist society, as in all class society, to insist on the realization of human freedom and equality as something more than an idle ethical phrase is to court ridicule as a dreamer and persecution as a threat.<sup>14</sup>

Since this species self-recognition, this full active awareness of oneself as a human being who is of a kind with every other human being, is not yet a materially realized fact of human life, we need theory to grasp it. This is not to say that ethical theory ought to be some retreat into pure abstraction, idealism, or utopianism. A Marxist approach to ethics takes stock of the already



really existing social element that both embodies the society to come and has the means and the motive to bring that society about. These are capitalism's gravediggers—the working class. Marxist ethics is intrinsically part and parcel of a theory of proletarian revolution.

Marxism, as is well known, sees in capitalist society a social landscape overwhelmingly defined by the battle between workers and their exploiting bosses. It is this class struggle that produces the social history of capitalist society. The class struggle is a struggle over material resources, a struggle for human survival, a struggle for domination or self-determination—it is a struggle for power. The outcome of the struggle will not be determined by which side is ethically “right” or “wrong,” but rather by the respective sides’ practical effectiveness in guarding and promoting their material interests. Given that this is so, what is or is not “ethical” might seem utterly beside the point, in which case, Marxism would be of a piece with a kind of radically subjective nihilism; it would be the proletariat’s battle plan, but not anything more than that.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of Marx’s theory of class struggle undergirds readings of Marxism as an “amoralist” theory, one that licenses any behavior whatsoever in the name of proletarian revolution and is ultimately silent on universal questions about the good of humanity at large.

This “amoralist” reading is a misapprehension that loses sight of one of the most central and enduring lessons of Marx’s work, one to which he returns again and again: transforming the world and having universally valid scientific knowledge of its objective character are linked together in praxis. Transforming the world requires some antecedent knowledge of its workings, grants further insight into its essential character, and renders increasingly thin the seeming membrane between our inner mental representations of the world and the objective world itself. Proletarian struggle’s centrality to the future of humanity inheres precisely in that it has a universal character. As Marx put it in an early work, the proletariat is

a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it . . . a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*.<sup>16</sup>

Marx takes himself to have developed a method capable of uniting into a single pursuit all forms of human inquiry about the natural and social world. As he and Engels wrote, "We know only a single science, the science of history."<sup>17</sup> Demonstrating their theory's capacity to account for the apparent ethical aspects of human social being is a crucial test of that claim. And while Marx and Engels denied that strictly moral appeals were themselves of any great use in transforming the world for the better, to understand how such matters as the relationship between freedom and determinism, the concept of human nature, and the idea of human flourishing all figure into Marxist theory is indispensable in developing and applying the materialist conception of history as a theory of social change.

### Analytical Marxism and Dialectical Method

Over the last several decades, there have been numerous initiatives to "re-contextualize," "resituate," "reevaluate," and "rethink" Marx, some of them, of course, quite salutary. But I greatly suspect there is value yet to be found in "*thinking Marx*," a principle I apply throughout the current study.<sup>18</sup> To that end, I take seriously Marx's claim to have developed a worthwhile and novel theoretical method, that of historical materialism. So while, as I say, the project here is one of critical reconstruction, I proceed from the working assumption that Marx had something sensible and illuminating to offer us.

An assumption fatal to many attempts to make sense of Marx, or to evaluate Marxist arguments and theorizations today, is the comfortable certainty that we already know what he said. But Anglophone philosophers, especially those working in the analytical tradition, are in many ways hamstrung in our reception of Marx's ideas. One of the reasons for this has to do with the circumstances of analytical philosophy's very inception as a repudiation of British Idealism.<sup>19</sup> To understand Marx's theoretical commitments, one must be willing to entertain certain Hegelian precepts, such as: the notion that all existing things are united as parts of a single, internally differentiated totality; the claim that an object can develop in a manner which comes to annihilate its present form and convert it into its opposite, and that this process is always already unfolding so that any object that is, also is what it is not; and the view that things have essential natures which only come to be knowable in the course of their dynamic historical development over time.

Analytical philosophers' understanding of Marx is deeply shaped by, among other factors, the field's legacy of hostility to Hegelian dialectics and to that theory's insistence that the world is knowable in and through contradictory aspects of existence: contradictions that cannot be reconciled in thought, unless also reconciled in history. This is to say: dialectics sees contradiction not primarily as a sure sign of confused or unclear *concepts* which must be rendered conceptually unambiguous so as to describe a static, "clear and distinct" reality. Rather, dialectics regards contradiction as a real, ontological, and objective feature of the complex, dynamic, internally conflictual, and ambiguous world, itself. The task of philosophers, then, is to develop concepts that capture this real, dialectical restlessness.

When analytical philosophers have treated the subject of Marx and ethics, they have tended to put the question in stark, undialectical terms: "Did Marx have an ethical theory or did he not?" The answer? Marx had an analysis of how human beings are essentially beings that produce themselves and their own conditions of existence, and he had a critique of class society's incapacity to permit human beings to live in full accordance with this essential nature, so that they might finally be what they are. This is, on the one hand, of a kind with virtue theoretical ethical critique in the mode of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. On the other hand, Marx constantly downplays the prescriptive aspect of his critique and presents it as a fundamentally descriptive project; only, the object under description is itself inherently and irreducibly normative, since human striving and progress toward greater human development (even if only in fits and starts and with frequent reversals) is already part of Being.

Analytical philosophers frequently dismiss this kind of answer as mysticism. The most well-known and influential form of this dismissal comes from the Analytical Marxist school of the 1970s and 1980s. These figures, such as G. A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, and Erik Olin Wright, also occasionally described themselves as engaged in "No Bullshit" Marxism—this to signal the degree of respect they felt dialectics ought to be accorded. Denying that Marx's theoretical method was of any value, they sought instead to place (what they took to be) his conclusions upon (what they also took to be) the firmer methodological foundations of analytical philosophy.

The Analytical Marxists denied the two central pillars of Marx's method: dialectics and methodological holism. The emphasis instead on sentential truth also had a rather striking interpretive implication: it is common among Analytical Marxists to pluck individual sentences from

Marx's corpus and submit them to conceptual analysis of what they *could* most “reasonably” mean, taken on their own and polished clean of dialectic.

I will allow the reader to draw their own conclusions as to whether this form of Analytical Marxism was in fact a species of Marxism, at all; there is a robust debate about this question.<sup>20</sup> What's clear, however, is that if we want to know whether the materialist conception of history *as Marx understood it* has an ethical content, then familiarity with the Analytical Marxist academic movement is not going to cut it. We need to go back, find what Marx had to say, and try to understand him on his own terms.

Most of the leading practitioners of Analytical Marxism eventually abandoned the movement, declaring Marxist theory unsalvageable not only in its precepts but perhaps also in its conclusions. Yet as James Furner writes in his 2018 book *Marx on Capitalism*, “Analytical Marxism has long ceased to be a live movement, of course. But it is one thing for Analytical Marxism to cease as a live movement, and another for its influence on how Marx is read or viewed to die out.”

In a January 2021 plenary speech delivered to the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Tommie Shelby identified himself as an Analytical Marxist, making him likely the best-known living philosopher to continue to wear the mantle. However, Shelby's variant of Analytical Marxism differs in that it emphasizes more of what is useful in analytical philosophical method than it does what is purportedly useless in Marxism. In defending the “analytical” aspect of this orientation, Shelby cites such virtues of analytical method as “the high value it places on conceptual clarity, logical rigor, and detailed argumentation” and “its reliance on careful scientific studies for its empirical premises.”<sup>21</sup>

I am in agreement with Shelby that these are vitally important conventions of analytical philosophy. I seek to help show, however, that to embrace Marxist method is not to abandon the best of what philosophy offers our attempts to cognize the world. Marx's critique of Enlightenment reason is not a wholesale rejection of objectivity, universality, and reason, as such, and is to be clearly distinguished from those critiques that are. Marx saw himself as *both* preserving what was truly rational and scientific in the best bourgeois thought of the age *and* demonstrating how it fell short of its pretensions to objectivity and universality; this failure, Marx thought could be corrected by attending more closely to the conflict, dynamism, and restlessness of existing, concrete reality and by seeking to represent that dynamism in thought

and in ways that nondialectical approaches cannot do. To the extent that the methods of analytical philosophers still instantiate some of the highest intellectual virtues of Enlightenment reason, these are not rejected, but rather already incorporated, subsumed, and surpassed in Marx's materialist conception of history.

### Précis of a Marxist Ethics

Marx's and Engels's "materialist conception of history" stands in a centuries-long tradition of philosophical engagement with the question "What makes scientific knowledge of the world possible, if it is possible?" What necessary connection, if any, exists between our ideas of the world and the world "itself," making our ideas count as ideas that are about the world as such? In the second of his 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx wrote,

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.<sup>22</sup>

Normative, ethical matters are knowable and objective in just the same way that any other aspect of existence is knowable for Marx—they are revealed in the course of our practical engagements with the world. They are not timeless, abstract, ahistorically given truths, but rather are historically emergent products of human social existence as it has developed in time. In developing a kind of self-knowledge at the level of the species, we discover an inner movement and aim, one which we may then take up consciously as our own and strive to realize. In this sense, a human *ought* is derived precisely from what humans are, have been, and might become. As Marx and Engels wrote in one of the manuscripts later posthumously published as part of *The Critique of the German Ideology*,

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.<sup>23</sup>

The ethical aims of communism are not deduced through passive, abstract contemplation, but rather are drawn as conclusions from the already existing human aims that are posited in practice through activities ranging from securing subsistence to engaging in social movement activism and revolutionary struggle. In this sense, Marx's ethical vision of communism is based on an understanding of the conditions that would have to be brought about in order to promote aims of survival and self-realization that are already inherent in the movement of human history. The conditions that working class struggles seek to overthrow are precisely those which threaten all human existence on the planet, making their victory necessary not only for the interests of their class but for the future of humanity itself.

Friedrich Engels observed in his 1878 work *Anti-Dühring* that “universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat.” He went on,

To thoroughly comprehend the historical conditions and thus the very nature of this act, to impart to the now oppressed proletarian class a full knowledge of the conditions and of the meaning of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish, this is the task of the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement, scientific socialism.<sup>24</sup>

With this invocation of “scientific socialism,” a phrase albeit borrowed from the French socialist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Engels cemented the term's synonymity with the materialist conception of history—that is to say, with Marxism. Depending on whom you ask, Marxist theory's claim to scientificity is its chief virtue or a hubristic and “ideological” boast. When we say of a claim, theory, method, or perspective that it is “scientific,” among many things we typically mean is that it is in some deep sense, objective, universal, and truth-tracking. What could justify Marxism—a theory that announces itself openly as one that represents the world from the interested perspective of just one subset of human beings, the working class—in laying claim to scientificity?

That Marxism is a “scientific” sort of socialism seems most immediately plausible in the case of its observations and predictions regarding economic matters. In the roughly one and three-quarters of a century since Marx and Engels wrote that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” perhaps countless events have occurred to confirm the working assumption that in class societies, the course of human events is

largely determined by conflicts between those who control the circumstances under which productive activity occurs and those who carry it out.

That Marxism is “scientific” strikes many as less plausible, however, with respect to its apparent normative commitments. One might think, with Louis Althusser, that Marx eschewed humanistic moral reasoning in roughly equal proportion as his engagement with economics and the critique of political economy deepened over the course of his later works.<sup>25</sup> Or one might argue, with Allen Wood, that to the extent Marx held onto moral commitments throughout his life, these were in tension and incompatible with an economic determinism to which he was committed.<sup>26</sup> More broadly, and especially in the Anglophone philosophical tradition, it is accepted as obvious that morality is not the sort of thing that lies within the purview of science at all, since science is a study of what *is* and morality pertains to what *ought to be*.

A Marxist worldview is at once ethical and scientific. It is simultaneously a view of the world from the interested perspective of the oppressed and exploited laboring masses *and* an objective and universally valid account of human existence. A key part of what has complicated many attempts properly to describe the normative character of Marxist theory is a set of assumptions regarding the limits of what is scientifically knowable—assumptions Marx did not share. Marx did regard some questions as in some sense “unaskable,” or at least, as ones that could not be posed without courting a kind of rational incoherence. Yet it is hardly incidental that Marx took up as his motto the words of the ancient Greek playwright, Terence, who in his 163 BC play *Heauton Timorumenos* wrote, “*humani nihil a me alienum puto*” (or, “nothing human is alien to me”). Human existence is itself a thoroughly human product. For this reason it is knowable through, and subject to intervention by, the operation of human productive activity. It is in and through our human attempts to transform the world that we come to know the world and our place in it.

The bourgeoisie, in advancing its own aims as a class and remaking the world in its image, made previously unimaginable strides in advancing science, greatly expanding humanity’s productive powers and transforming human understanding of our place in the world. Philosophical concepts of liberty, reason, equality, and individual right—themselves still mystifying and incomplete—were nonetheless ideological advances over doctrines such as the divine right of kings. But these at least ostensibly liberal concepts, and the social contractarian philosophies of which they are elements, betray the contradictions of bourgeois rule. The same capitalist ideologies employed



to justify the capitalists' overthrow of feudalism also in turn serve white supremacy, patriarchy, imperialism, oppression, and exploitation; they function as tools of liberation but just as often, of domination. (These contradictions of bourgeois liberalism have been well discussed by authors including Jean Bricmont, Charles Mills, and Carole Pateman, among others.)<sup>27</sup>

As much as capitalist rule courts irrationalism in order to evade critique, ultimately it cannot dispense entirely with science.<sup>28</sup> For the working class, objective knowledge of the world is only more crucial. Whereas the capitalist class relies on mystification to conceal the nature of its rule, the proletariat as a class has no incentive to shrink away from the hard truths facing all of humanity as a species. Climate change is not imminent and still less it is illusory; it is here and it may well wipe us out. Imperialist war does not bring freedom or dignity to people on the planet—it degrades and destroys them. Increasingly, capitalism cannot even maintain the pretense of holding solutions to humanity's crises; it counsels that we acquiesce instead to their permanence.<sup>29</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, Margaret Thatcher advised that there was no alternative to capitalism and neoliberalism. More recently, we have been counseled to sacrifice our very lives for the economy.<sup>30</sup>

The working class contains the vast majority of human beings on the planet. In their struggle for greater freedom, power, and autonomy—for the conditions of fulfilling life—they battle for recognition that the world around them is one they have made through their laboring and that they can make anew. To reason about what the life of our species ought to be, about what we ought to do, and about how we ought to treat one another is ethical reasoning. It is necessary in order to imagine a world beyond the one we now know. And so against the capitalist insistence that there is no alternative, a working-class perspective reveals that another world is possible. But Marxist theory offers no creed of self-abnegation. That, it leaves to the bourgeois ideologues preaching “Patience.”

Given the holistic character of Marxist theory, the attempt to articulate a Marxist ethical perspective brings us into conversation with other longstanding debates in Marx scholarship. Among these are the implications of Marxist ideology critique for ethical thought. Articulating a Marxist ethics and a Marxist critique of prevailing moral theories allows us to diagnose the hypocrisy of moralistic criticisms of Marxism. It allows us to better make sense of numerous complex themes in Marx's thought such as the relationship between freedom and determinism, the notion that the ruling ideas in a society are the ideas of its ruling class, and the Aristotelian view in Marx



that human beings have a nature which determines their proper aims. It additionally sheds light on the role of ethics in our social discourse and poses distinct challenges for ethical theories that focus first and foremost on moral dictates addressed to individuals, which Marxist theory does not do. It has implications for individuals, but its primary addressee is the working class as a whole.

Marx did not simply dismiss capitalist morality and leave things at that. He returned to the subject of morality again and again, all throughout his career. If we neglect the project of articulating a specifically Marxist approach to ethics, we unnecessarily restrict our ability to make sense of that—of what Marx said at great length about morality and of why he found it so necessary to say.

## **The Structure of the Argument**

The remainder of this book is organized around seven major themes in Marx's treatment of ethics. The progression of these themes is designed in such a way that their effect is cumulative, each building on the ones before it so that we gradually acquire an understanding of Marx's incredibly detailed philosophical system. I begin in Chapter 2, "Ideology Critique and the Critique of Morality," by considering the question of whether morality is a form of "ideology" and discuss what this would mean for Marxism as a form of "ideology critique" that reveals the often misleading and illusory characteristics of ideology. I argue there for a reading of Marx's "ideology" concept befitting morality as an ideal phenomenon that persists in class society but that would be "abolished" together with the abolition of capitalism. In this chapter, I address challenges from authors including Louis Althusser and Charles Mills who present differing and divergent accounts of "ideology" in Marx.

I then go on in Chapter 3 to explain Marx's method, what he and Engels called, "the materialist conception of history" and which is commonly referred to as "historical materialism." I argue that it is necessary to distinguish Marx's historical materialism from any "one-sided" or epiphenomenalist account of the relationship between matter and ideas. The materialist conception of history is one that regards humans' productive activity as central and fundamental in determining their form of life. I describe what Marx and Engels take their historical materialist method to reveal about the nature of

human beings, and how their nature provides the basis for a normativity that emerges out of humans' social activity as they produce in order to satisfy an ever-expanding array of needs, both those based on subsistence and those which are socially produced.

Having an account in view of Marx's conception of human nature then situates us to investigate what it means, on Marx's theory, for human beings to be alienated from that nature. This is the subject of Chapter 4, along with the historiographical question, posed by influential French Marxist, Louis Althusser, of whether Marx eventually abandons his concepts of human nature and of alienation in his pursuit of a more "scientific" approach to understanding human history.

I introduce the concept of "dialectical compatibilism" in Chapter 5, to describe Marx's account of freedom and determinism as two mutually conditioning aspects of a single, historically developing unity. This dialectically compatible unity of freedom and determinism develops in a manner shaped and driven by humans' attempts to intervene into our natural and social existence. This account frees my interpretation of Marx from the trap set by a rigid opposition of freedom and determinism in human history. In keeping with the principle that all of human existence is a human product, human freedom is to be understood as a historically emergent product of human activity aimed at satisfying our needs.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, we delve more deeply into Marx's disagreements with various extant moral theories and principles. In Chapter 6, I take up the concept of "individuality" (which comes up also in Chapter 3's discussion of "human nature") and demonstrate the centrality of that concept for unpacking the ethical content of Marxist theory. Individuality is itself, like freedom, a human product, one that emerges as the outcome of humans' expanding range of capacities, powers, and ways of being. This is in contrast to what Marx calls "bourgeois" individuality—individuality as an abstraction of mutually hostile competitors. It is also here in Chapter 6 that we engage in a detailed discussion of Marx's engagement with Max Stirner's ethical egoism. I argue that since the overwhelming majority of what was posthumously published as Marx's and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology* is dedicated to a refutation of ethical egoism, that collection ought to be thought of as containing an exhaustive work of moral philosophy with numerous insights for understanding Marx's relationship to ethics.

We come to Marx's critique of "bourgeois" freedom and "bourgeois" equal right in Chapter 7. Here, we find a striking example of ideology critique and

the application of dialectics, as Marx analyzes these concepts and their deployment, showing that in practice, bourgeois freedom and right are the very opposite of what they seem to be in theory. In this chapter, we also extend our discussion of freedom from Chapter 5 and introduce the notion of transitional rights which early revolutionary societies would guarantee but that would lose their meaning in a communist society in which the flourishing of each is, and is understood to be, the necessary condition of the flourishing of all.

Chapter 8 treats Marx's critiques of a range of moral perspectives including Christian ethics, Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and, briefly, Malthusianism. Rather than simply dismissing these theories as counter to the class interests of the proletariat, Marx offers nuanced, detailed, and illuminating critiques of a range of moral views. This enriches our understanding of these theories and grants us deeper insight into Marx's own philosophical theory and method. I place special emphasis on exploring the relationship between Marxism and Kantianism, as these two theories are most closely related in terms of a shared philosophical tradition and the question of whether they might be brought together into a Marx-Kant synthesis has been raised again and again in the history of Marx interpretation.

While my aim throughout this book is to argue that there is a coherent ethical content in Marxist theory, I nonetheless also argue that Marx understands ethics as a transitory historical phenomenon. The conditions for its abolition have not yet obtained, but in a fully developed communist society, they would. In Chapter 9, I present various interpretations of what it could mean to say that morality would be "abolished." Drawing on the tradition of virtue ethics, I offer an account of what it would be to exist and to socially interact in such a society.

Chapter 10 is the book's conclusion. There, I draw together the book's major themes and make a final case for assessing human social existence as first and foremost, itself a human product. Beyond the conclusion, readers will find a Coda to this book. There, drawing on the historical example of Angela Davis in 1969, I offer brief reflections on the past, present, and future of radical scholarship in the academy.

## 2

## Ideology Critique and the Critique of Morality

Among Marxist theory's most important influences upon the academy has been the critique of ideology, which is essential to such fields as Cultural Studies, Critical Theory, Critical Legal Studies, and Critical Race Theory, among others. The core of Marxist ideology critique is to acknowledge the material and sociohistorical determinants of our forms of consciousness and especially to identify how the exercise of power determines which ideas become widely held. In identifying the sources of our theoretical (or, more often, *pretheoretical*) ideas, we gain greater insight into their content and into the role they often play in justifying our social, economic, and political status quo. Ideology critique permits us to demonstrate how it is that a given concept might seem transparent and simple at first blush; but when we examine how the object corresponding to that concept exists and unfolds in history, we may realize that in practice, it is the very opposite of what it announces itself to be in theory. (This is a theme to which we shall return in Chapter 5, on freedom and determinism, and in Chapter 7, on freedom and rights.)

There has been significant debate regarding whether the centrality of ideology critique in Marx's theory entails his wholesale rejection of any form of consciousness that could reasonably be described as "ideological." This question of whether or not Marx eschews ideology altogether is of the utmost importance to a study of Marx's moral thought. If Marx regards all ideology as inherently and uniformly reactionary, then his theory can hardly be supposed to support the view that morality, which is a species of ideology, can have a revolutionary content in some cases.

I argue that to say, as Marx does, that moral commands are a form of "ideology" is not by itself to reject all moral reasoning out of hand. It is however to insist, as Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, that "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process," and that like other forms of thought, it has "no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their

material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason, to evaluate and understand the content of moral theorizing cannot be solely the purview of abstract contemplation; we must understand the emergence and application of these theories within their historical, economic, and sociopolitical context.

Over the course of the present chapter, I first present a positive account of how “ideology” is best understood on Marx’s view. Hesitation to take the Marxist concept of “ideology” seriously often stems from concern that to do so will lead to a “doctrinaire” or “dogmatic” and rigid opposition of uniformly false, mystifying, and illusory bourgeois consciousness on the one hand, to Marxist theory on the other. But not only does this not square with Marx’s often glowing assessments of the historical role of bourgeois theory, but the concern itself reveals the degree to which mainstream approaches to Marxist theory tend to present it in caricature. Marx advocated “the ruthless criticism of all that exists,” not mindless arson. Therefore, we need an “ideology” concept that allows us to make sense both of Marx’s critique of what is illusory and mystifying in bourgeois thought and of what Marx felt ought to be preserved in a more highly developed form.

I then go on to describe three competing analyses of Marx’s “ideology” concept: Louis Althusser’s, Nicholas Abercrombie’s and Bryan S. Turner’s, and Charles Mills’s. Althusser’s is the most well-known of the three and easily the most influential, arguing that ideology is “thought devoid of history.” I argue that whatever the merit of such a concept, it cannot be Marx’s. Abercrombie’s and Turner’s is the least well known of the three; I address it here because it lays out, in an illuminating way, a common misconception about the nexus of ideology, class interest, and class consciousness.

Charles Mills’s analysis of Marx’s “ideology” concept underwent key changes over the course of his writings on the subject. Initially, he takes ideology to be theory that mystifies its own origins and efficacy; later, he takes it to be a synonym, in Marx’s work, for “superstructure.” Although a staunch critic of Marxism, for several decades, Mills remained one of the most prominent Anglophone political philosophers consistently to engage with Marxist ideas, making his analysis relevant for us here. This is especially so, given the role of a form of ideology critique in animating the argument of one of his most well-known works, his 1997, *The Racial Contract*.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of Marx’s critique of moral suasion and of what he took to be the voluntaristic moralism of “utopian” socialism. Understanding Marx’s critiques of utopianism sheds light on what

he took to be the limits of moral injunction and how these limitations follow from central precepts in his historical materialist critique of ideology in general.

### **“Ideology” is Not a Wholly Pejorative Concept**

In the current section, I will focus on two arguments in *defense* of ideology or at least, in defense of certain aspects thereof. These are both arguments that Marx himself makes, but which have received little attention in treatments of this subject. The first argument, appearing in the *Manifesto*, is that ideology has a potentially revolutionary character and can assist even its bourgeois practitioners in seeing the need to switch their allegiances to the working class. The second argument hangs closely together with the explanation of Marx's historical materialist method. Because ideology is the form in which human beings become conscious of “the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production” and “fight it out,” it would be wrongheaded to advocate purely “nonideological” modes of thought in a class society.<sup>2</sup>

Before addressing either of these arguments directly, however, I will first address three interrelated questions. These are: What is bourgeois ideology? What is proletarian ideology? What is the relation between them?

Put briefly, bourgeois ideology is the view of nature and society from the class standpoint of the bourgeoisie. Its specific perspectives on the desirability of existing economic relations, the mutability or lack thereof of human characteristics and personality traits, and the best explanations of change and development in nature, to name just a few of countless possible questions for human beings, are shaped and determined in different ways by the bourgeoisie's conception of itself and of bourgeois society as the highest possible form of human social development. This is not to say that it is impossible to see from within a bourgeois standpoint that there may well be significant room for improvement on existing conditions. However, bourgeois ideology, and the class standpoint within which it is produced, are distinguished by a conviction that any further human progress can be achieved only through the leadership of the bourgeois class and its institutions, and upon the economic basis of capitalist exchange.

As Marx writes in 1859, it is human beings' “social existence that determines their consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> The economic interests of the capitalist

class, together with its actual dominance in existing class society, lead its members to confuse wittingly or unwittingly the conditions necessary for the promotion of their class's interests with the conditions necessary for the advancement of humanity as a whole. As Georg Lukács writes of bourgeois thought in *History and Class Consciousness*,

The veil drawn over the nature of bourgeois society is indispensable to the bourgeoisie itself. For the insoluble internal contradictions of the system become revealed with increasing starkness and so confront its supporters with a choice. Either they must consciously ignore insights which become increasingly urgent or else they must suppress their own moral instincts in order to be able to support with a good conscience an economic system that serves only their own interests.<sup>4</sup>

This tendency can be overcome with a complete change of class allegiance, in which an individual bourgeois or bourgeois ideologist comes to identify with the interests of the working class and attempts to theorize from within the proletariat standpoint. Such an achievement can at times take place when there is a great preponderance of evidence telling against significant elements of bourgeois ideology together with a personal commitment on the part of the individual to reflect reality in their thinking as faithfully and as clearly as possible.

It is important, when speaking of what Marx refers to as bourgeois ideology, to recognize its limits but also to appreciate the huge scope of possible expression within those limits. There is a diversity of opinion across the contemporary political spectrum of bourgeois thought, and, as it is also important to note, elements of bourgeois ideology can take on a different character at different points in history. Thinkers as diverse as John Locke, Maximilien Robespierre, Irving Kristol, and Kofi Annan each develop and promote bourgeois ideology, albeit in drastically different forms and with fundamental disagreements on key questions. And even a central tenet of that ideology, such as that the bourgeoisie represents the interests of humanity and is its rightful leader, was revolutionary and progressive in the eighteenth century and now deeply conservative, today.

A key feature of bourgeois ideology and of the bourgeois mode of production at its inception, as opposed to the feudal society that it opposed and replaced, was that it gave pride of place to science and to materialism. Rationality, materialism, and a scientific worldview free



from the backwardness and superstition of feudalism facilitated the major advances in production that laid the basis for the rise of the bourgeois class. Huge advancements have been made in human beings' theoretical understanding of the world and in their capacity to master it and subordinate it to their ends, all within an ideology that takes capitalist class society to be the highest form of human social organization. As Marx and Engels write in *The Communist Manifesto*, "Whereas past industrial classes depended on maintaining production unchanged, the bourgeoisie must constantly revolutionize production and therewith, society."<sup>5</sup> And it is capitalism and the need of the bourgeoisie to constantly change and revolutionize society which have in turn produced a need for higher levels of human consciousness, making it possible for human beings to have a more accurate and scientific knowledge of their social existence than was possible in previous class societies. In Marx's words, the bourgeoisie has removed the "sentimental halo" from relations of exploitation and "man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."<sup>6</sup>

However, although that interest in science remains an important part of bourgeois thought today, it exists often in a narrow or distorted form, and frequently takes a backseat to this class's historical need to compromise with feudal and religious forces and/or to defend itself against working-class challenges to its rule.<sup>7</sup> Whereas criticism of religion was once a defining aspect of bourgeois ideology, religious mysticism now finds itself quite at home within it.<sup>8</sup> The Enlightenment ideal which held up science as a form of thought and practice in which the deepest and most fundamental questions could be answered through the work and intelligence of human beings, has given way to a conception of science as merely the art of manipulation, often divorced from a deeper inquiry into the nature of reality.

Bourgeois ideology is by no means a form of consciousness that exists only among members of the bourgeoisie or among its ideologists. As Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class," and not only does the ruling class hold these ideas, but throughout the history of a class society, it is usually the case that *most* of its members also hold those ideas.<sup>9</sup> These ideas are developed and promulgated by the ruling class in large part because they bolster the reign of that class, and the ruling class has the best infrastructure at its disposal to disseminate those ideas. But this alone is not enough to ensure broad assent. In a capitalist society, bourgeois consciousness finds widespread acceptance in large part because it actually does reflect and explain, if only in a distorted



and limited manner, the world in which members of that society find themselves. As Marx writes in *On the Poverty of Philosophy*:

Social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. . . . The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations.<sup>10</sup>

To find “proof” that a woman’s labor is less valuable than a man’s, one need look no further than the fact that women earn roughly eighty cents on the dollar when compared with men. The “evidence” that Blacks are inherently dangerous and must be controlled can be found in the high proportion of them who are ensnared in the criminal justice system. Much about the real social relations in which human beings stand to one another under capitalism seems to confirm the “ruling ideas” of that society, which in turn provide an ideological bulwark for the maintenance of those social relations. It is with this in mind that, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx replies to the charges of an imagined bourgeois interlocutor:

But don’t wrangle with us so long as you apply, to our intended abolition of bourgeois property, the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, &c. Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class.<sup>11</sup>

However, within capitalist society, not all ideology is bourgeois ideology. Within class societies there exist not only the ideas of the ruling class, but also the ideas of the class that is ruled, but in the process of coming to power. In the struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the ideas of the proletariat are capable of bringing the blurry view of the world through bourgeois ideology into sharp focus, revealing what appeared to be the essential and eternal social relations of capitalist society as rather historical, transient, and susceptible to abolition through the active intervention of the masses and the production of new economic relations. As Marx writes in *On the Poverty of Philosophy*:

The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations. Thus the ideas, these categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are *historical and transitory products*.

There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement—*mors immortalis*.<sup>12</sup>

Insofar as there is a substantial amount of thought within bourgeois ideology that is useful and accurate in reflecting reality, proletarian ideology does not totally discard it and it would be mistaken to label the whole of bourgeois ideology throughout its history as worthless. The working class is itself a part of bourgeois society and seeks to transform its relations of production, building socialism upon a material basis formed by the forces of production developed under capitalism. Similarly, proletarian ideology is in part the attempt to identify and preserve what is best in bourgeois thought. Proletarian ideology seeks to transform intellectual production so that further progress can be made in developing a theoretical understanding that both provides the most accurate possible reflection of reality and the ideal tools necessary for human beings to transform nature in accordance with their needs. The transition from bourgeois to proletarian ideology is succinctly described by Marx when he writes:

When people speak of the ideas that revolutionise society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.<sup>13</sup>

We can come now to the first of two principal arguments I will advance in this section against understanding all ideology as inherently reactionary: the argument that ideology, as an attempt to grapple with the conflicts between the relations of production and the forces of production, can play a progressive role in revealing to its practitioners the need for a society led by the working class in the interests of humanity.

Marx's views with regard to the potentially progressive role of ideology are clearly expressed in his remarks on the phenomenon of bourgeois ideologists who shed their class allegiance to the bourgeoisie and join the proletariat in

its struggle. For Marx, the reality of the historical situation under capitalism is most clearly appreciated from the point of view of the proletariat, but is by no means accessible only to actual proletarians. It is possible in principle for any person to adopt this standpoint and to identify with the aims of the working class. In these cases, members of other classes, for instance, of the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, recognize that the proletariat is the force in society capable of advancing the interests of humanity as a whole. Marx and Engels describe this process in the *Manifesto*:

Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the progress of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

As I mentioned earlier in the present section, at least two factors come into place in cases where members of the bourgeoisie join the proletariat: (1) a preponderance of evidence emerges which throws fundamental tenets of bourgeois ideology into question; and (2) a commitment on the part of the individual person to the pursuit of truth and, we can add, to the continued existence and development of humanity. Here, both of these factors figure prominently in Marx's description of how members of a ruling class may go over to the side of a revolutionary class, and of how such defections took place in the conflict between feudal nobility and the bourgeoisie, and now take place in the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In a time of crisis, bourgeois ideology, and its commitment to the necessary and desirable permanence of capitalist society and of the bourgeoisie's leadership of humanity, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain alongside a commitment to understanding reality. As the contradictions within capitalist society become more "violent" and "glaring," it becomes easier to see that a continued existence and development for human beings will require a fundamentally different type of society in which these glaring contradictions have been resolved.

In this passage then, far from denigrating ideology or assigning it a purely reactionary role, Marx expresses the progressive potential of ideology. It should be stressed, however, that it is a limited potential—only a “small section of the ruling class” will see the need to support the struggle of the revolutionary class. But Marx emphasizes that in the case of bourgeois ideologists who side with the working class, it is precisely their ideological accomplishments that allow them to see clearly that the proletariat is “the class that holds the future in its hands.”

Were it the case that on Marx's view ideology is always false consciousness and always obscures reality, it would be impossible to make good sense of Marx's statement that “in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists” become radicalized in great part through their own theoretical work and ability to capture and reflect a historical moment in which the victory of the proletariat is required in order for human progress to continue. Additionally, Marx also writes that as members of the bourgeoisie switch allegiances and join the working class, this provides the proletariat “with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.”<sup>15</sup> This underscores the point that not all bourgeois thought is inherently reactionary; rather, what is valuable and progressive in it can be incorporated and further developed in proletarian ideology, and in a socialist society, in a way that is no longer possible in a society based on capitalist relations of production.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us now to the second argument in defense of ideology: because ideology is the form in which human beings become conscious of “the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production” and “fight it out,” it is simply wrongheaded to expect there to be an abolition of ideological modes of thought in a class society, and Marx does not make this mistake.<sup>17</sup>

Famously, Marx envisions a future society in which ideological forms such as morality and religion would be abolished. Communism is the theory of the existing elements within capitalist society that aim to produce a new society based on democratic control of society's resources, the satisfaction of human needs, and the development of human powers. But the society aimed at in Communism is not merely a new form of class society with the proletariat as the ruling class: rather it is the abolition of class society altogether and with it, class domination and class struggle. Communism does not propose for this new society a new moral, political, or legal order because these forms of thought have their basis and their application in class society, where they express the class struggle and function as ideological weapons with

which to wage it. For Marx, ideological forms of thought would indeed cease to exist in a fully developed communist society. However, this does not mean that Marx thinks it is either possible or desirable to think “nonideologically” in the present instance.

At the moment, we still live in class society and the working class must wage its struggle within it. Marx does not argue that moral theory, philosophy, political science, and so on are already impotent and outdated. Nothing could be further from the truth, as he himself engages in exactly these forms of thought. Moreover, because a transitional socialist society would also be a class society, there, too, the working class would use ideology to theorize its historical situation and assert its leadership in society.<sup>18</sup>

As Marx asks (rhetorically):

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed?<sup>19</sup>

Proletarian consciousness and socialist consciousness will therefore differ greatly in content from bourgeois consciousness. Yet they will share in common with bourgeois consciousness the fact that they are distinctively ideological, because they occur in class societies and reflect an ongoing class struggle.

Now that I have provided the two principal arguments against conceiving of ideology as inherently reactionary, I would like to say a bit more about Marx’s view that consciousness in a fully developed communist society *would* be nonideological, and in particular about his rejection of the idea that there are any eternal moral truths. Marx imagines an interlocutor’s retort to these views:

“Undoubtedly,” it will be said, “religious, moral, philosophical, and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change. There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting

them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.”<sup>20</sup>

This charge provides Marx with an opportunity to counterpose his own historicized understanding of morality, et al., to the idea that such forms of thought are ahistorical, eternal, and unchanging. That certain moral concepts have been common among various historical epochs need not entail that the concepts are valid independently of the historical circumstances from which they are drawn or to which they are applied. Marx points out that the “states of society” mentioned by his interlocutor have all been marked by the existence of classes and of class conflict. It is this class conflict which has made these forms of thought valid as reflections of reality or as intellectual tools with which to understand and/or transform it. Marx replies,

What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, *viz.*, the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms. The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involved the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.<sup>21</sup>

Since social consciousness is determined by historical reality, it is entirely to be expected that societies conditioned primarily by class conflict would have certain ideas in common. But Communism is a movement which abolishes class society and seeks to produce a new society based not on class conflict but on human solidarity. “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms,” Marx writes, “we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>22</sup> Marx does not think that a future communist society would produce a new moral code since, firstly, it would already be a society based on the needs of human beings and secondly, it would be developed, as Marx argues, out of a long revolutionary process in which values such as solidarity would become realized in normal human practice through habituation and

education. This does not mean that at present, in our class society, there is not genuine morality, genuine moral facts of the matter about what human beings ought to do, or the resources to make factive moral judgments about existing states of affairs. A world in which class antagonism exists is a world that still has a place for genuine morality. Not only is there a role for morality in capitalist society, but Marx also believes there will be a role for morality in a transitional socialist society, as well, even as the gap between what is and what ought to be grows smaller.

Marx attempts to expose what he sees as the hypocritical posturings of bourgeois morality. Most of all, he criticizes the tendency of bourgeois morality to justify the existing state of affairs as desirable and necessary, and also to see morality itself as fixed and unchanging. Yet Marx shows no sign of shying away from negative moral judgments of bourgeois society. These judgments are based on what I argue is the crux of Marx's condemnation of capitalism: that capitalism degrades and limits human beings, thwarts the development of their capacities, fails to satisfy their existing needs, and prevents them from producing more sophisticated modes of social interaction and metabolism with the natural world that would in turn engender in them new needs and lay the material basis for an unlimited human progress and development.

It should be noted that Marx readily accepts the interlocutor's charge that Communism seeks to abolish political science, among other ideological forms of thought. And it goes almost without saying that Marx thought it was important to carry out theoretical work in politics as an aid to revolutionary action. The subtle point lies in understanding that one of the goals of Communism as a theory and as a movement is to use political means to abolish man as a political animal and to abolish the basis for politics altogether. "In the beginning," Marx writes, "this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property."<sup>23</sup> However, over time, as class distinctions disappear, "the public power will lose its political character" and the proletariat will have "abolished its own supremacy as a class."<sup>24</sup> The desired end is a society without politics and class domination. The prescribed means are political organization and what Marx refers to as the democratic and revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>25</sup>

In much the same vein, philosophy is a necessary tool in order to bring about a world in which philosophy no longer exists as a separate, specialized enterprise divorced from human beings' everyday existence. And similarly, as long as there is a gap between how human beings ought to relate to one

another and how they actually do relate to one another, there will continue to be a role for a genuine human morality and for moral theory in working out answers to the questions, "What ought we to do?" and "How ought we to live?" The need for this role to be filled can only disappear in a future Communist society based on the needs of human beings and in which human beings have interactions with one another that are based on relations of human solidarity. But at the moment, there is still plenty of need for moral theory.

### Rival Analyses of Marx's "Ideology" Concept

In making sense of the influential reading of Marx provided by the mid-Twentieth Century French Communist, Louis Althusser, it is critically important to note that Althusser's own Marxian or Marx-inspired ideology concept is not itself meant to be a rendering of Marx's concept. In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser clearly distinguishes between Marx's ideology concept and his own, writing,

While the thesis I wish to defend formally speaking adopts the terms of *The German Ideology* ("ideology has no history"), it is radically different from the positivist and historicist thesis of *The German Ideology*.

Althusser reads Marx's "ideology" concept, at least in Marx's later writings beginning with those published as *The Critique of the German Ideology*, as having a content in line with what I have called the "pejorative" interpretation thereof. That is to say, Althusser's interpretation of Marx is heavily informed by the supposition that for Marx, ideology is more or less identical with "false consciousness." He writes,

Ideology, then, is for Marx an imaginary assemblage (*bricolage*), a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the "day's residues" from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.<sup>26</sup>

Althusser goes on to claim that for Marx, "ideology has no history." Continuing the passage cited above, Althusser writes,

It is on this basis that ideology has no history in *The German Ideology*, since its history is outside it, where the only existing history is, the history of concrete individuals, etc.



In *The German Ideology*, the thesis that ideology has no history is therefore a purely negative thesis, since it means both:

- (1) ideology is nothing insofar as it is a pure dream (manufactured by who knows what power: if not by the alienation of the division of labour, but that, too, is a negative determination);
- (2) ideology has no history, which emphatically does not mean that there is no history in it (on the contrary, for it is merely the pale, empty and inverted reflection of real history) but that it has no history of its own.<sup>27</sup>

But Marx never says that ideology “has no history,” not even in the qualified sense of its being nothing more than an “empty and inverted reflection of real history.” For Marx, the historical development of ideology is determined by the practical activity of human beings producing and reproducing their conditions of existence. Marx, as a materialist, of course does not think *any* idea of any type has a history that is in some way independent and unmoored from the material circumstances under which it is thought. But in fact, no part of Being has “a history of its own”; ideology is no worse off in this regard than a field or a herd of cattle. Althusser distorts Marx’s text and mystifies the concepts of history and historicity, obscuring far more than he illuminates about Marx’s own use of the concept of “ideology.”<sup>28</sup>

Althusser further mischaracterizes Marx’s historical materialist critique of ideology by insisting that for Marx, ideology is best understood as “imaginary,” giving us no insight at all into the objective relations of production in a given society. Althusser writes, “all ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, according to Althusser, ideology for Marx provides no evidence about the real, objective nature of things; it is necessarily wholly separate from science.

In an attempt to “materialize” the ideology concept and correct the positivism he claims to detect in Marx, Althusser coins the term “ideological state apparatuses.” These are sociopolitical structures that call upon and activate (or, in Althusser’s terminology, “interpellate”) individuals to behave in ways determined by their social roles. But when he goes on to write that “all ideology has the function of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects,” Althusser comes dangerously close to practicing exactly that method which Marx already rejects as a doomed attempt to “set out from what men say, imagine, conceive . . . in order to arrive at men in the flesh.”<sup>30</sup>

Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses is designed to correct for what he considers the inert, because insufficiently material, character of ideology in Marx's development of the concept. Ideology, for Althusser, plays a role in history because it is not properly understood as an ideal substance but rather as a set of always-already embodied practices, responses, and reflexes. But in attempting to go "beyond" Marx, Althusser comes around full circle to the same questions of (material) determinism and (ideal) spontaneity that animated the German Idealist tradition, and in response to which Marx offered a more plausible and complex answer than the one Althusser proposes in its place.

Already in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx writes,

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, what it means exactly for theory to "grip the masses" is left vague, here. But by the time we get to the writings posthumously published as Marx's and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology*, the historical materialist account of the relationship between ideas and matter is far more sophisticated than Althusser lets on in his description of it. Althusser is not wrong to note that if ideology, for Marx, is nothing more than an "empty" "bricolage" of "residue," and admits of no internal development, then it must remain mysterious how such spiritual detritus could ever play a causal role in determining the course of history and affecting material circumstances. However, Althusser's materialism itself has more in common with the "one-sided" materialism Marx rejects than it does with the historical materialist approach of "setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process."<sup>32</sup> This is an approach, Marx and Engels argue, "which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness."<sup>33</sup>

It is mistaken to construe this perspective as one of matter, taken abstractly on the one hand, strictly deterministically producing a kind of abstract ideal echo, on the other. For Marx, the solution to philosophy's puzzle about the relation of ideas to matter is found in the active labor process in which human beings are necessarily always involved (albeit in more or less alienated ways). This is why, for Marx and Engels, we must start with "real,

active” human beings engaged in the process of producing and reproducing their means of subsistence. In the process of labor, the distinction between ideal and material aspects of Being can be made only in abstraction: labor is the active combination and integration of ideal forms with matter, and the practical realization of ideas in matter. The philosophical puzzle, then, is one that cannot be resolved in a purely contemplative mode; for Marx, it is resolved practically, in the activity of labor.

The materialist conception of history is, in turn, a perspective on the world from the point of view of the active laborer. It is “materialist” not in the sense of denying the distinctively ideal character of thought, consciousness, or ideology, or in the sense of reducing it to some cluster of strictly determinist mechanisms. The materialism of Marx’s critique of ideology inheres in that it is only by proceeding from human beings as material, biological beings, intervening in their material world in order to satisfy their material needs, that one may arrive at this resolution of the puzzle about how to understand the relationship of ideas to matter.

Let us turn now to Nicholas Abercrombie and Bryan S. Turner, who in their 1978 paper “The Dominant Ideology Thesis” argue that Marx actually presents two conflicting theories of ideology. The first theory (implied, they argue, by Marx’s and Engels’s claim that “social being determines consciousness”), “suggests that each class forms its own system of belief in accordance with its own particular interests which will be basically at variance with those of other classes. The second suggests that all classes share in the system of belief imposed by the dominant class.”<sup>34</sup>

Abercrombie and Turner argue that if it is the case that the ideology of a class is determined by the interests of that class, then it cannot also be the case that the ruling ideas of an epoch are the ideas of the ruling class, as Marx and Engels claim in their *Critique of the German Ideology*. This is so, Abercrombie and Turner write, because if the ruling ideas of the epoch are the ruling class’s ideas, then we should expect their ideas to also be the ideas of the working class. However, if that were so, then it would seem to rule out the possibility that the working class’s ideas are determined by their *own* class interests, interests that are in turn antagonistic to those of the bourgeoisie.

This is an error into which one falls if one fails, as these authors do, to understand class conflict as an interactive and evolving system in motion. The “social being” of the working class does not manifest in isolation from the bourgeoisie but rather is shaped by it, the class with the greater social power to craft those material conditions within which the working class develops

its consciousness of the world. The working class does not simply osmotically soak up bourgeois ideas. It is one's life that determines one's consciousness and the proletariat lives in bourgeois society. Its class consciousness is the consciousness of itself as a class conditioned by material circumstances arranged about as far as possible to produce and reproduce the rule of the bourgeoisie.

Under these circumstances, the consciousness produced is therefore not usually *Das Kapital*, sprung fully formed from the head of each and every worker. It is rather a mix of ideas, attitudes, and sentiments shaped by the experience of living under capital. There is no irreconcilable tension between what Abercrombie and Turner take to be Marx's two theories because Marx's point about the "ruling ideas" in society is not to be construed so simplistically as they present it. Capital cannot rule except in a world made by labor. Therefore, when we speak of the ruling class and of ruling ideas, we must not lose sight of the fact that just as workers' consciousness is forged under capitalism, so the rule of capital does not take place in a vacuum. It is shaped in ways that are determined in part by its pitched battles with labor.

To give a concrete example of what I mean when I say that class conflict is interactive and evolving, we can look, for example, at the ebbs and flows of labor militancy in various capitalist economies. In times of rising labor militancy, workers are able to raise their consciousness of their own interests and fight for them, chipping away at the often seemingly absolute hegemony of exploitative capitalist domination. It is worth noting, as well, that key aspects of social justice organizing tend to be explicitly educational in focus, whether in the form of teach-ins, reading groups, lectures, pamphlets, shared syllabi, and so on. Demands that may have previously seemed unthinkable are suddenly pressed into the public discourse, finding their way onto the bargaining table. In other periods of history, when the labor movement is more quiescent, they lose this ground. Without the opportunities created by a rise in mass struggle, opportunities for political education also tend to shrink. My point is that if Abercrombie and Turner expect to find in Marx a diagram, valid for all historical circumstances, that can universally describe the exact balance of bourgeois and proletarian influence on the emerging and developing consciousness of members of the working class, they will be disappointed. This is not a shortcoming of Marxist theory, but rather an appropriate reflection of the dynamic character of the object under analysis.

Charles Mills, in his 1994 article "Marxism, 'Ideology,' and Moral Objectivism," offers a far more nuanced and sensitive analysis. Mills argues

that in identifying morality as a form of ideology, Marx and Engels are not making a claim about the falsity of moral statements themselves, but rather a claim about the falsity of what morality purports to be, namely, objectively true and also efficacious in improving humans' circumstances. To say that morality is ideology in Marx's and Engels's sense, Mills writes, is to say that it "characteristically misunderstands its own genesis, is unrealistic about its psychological capacity to motivate, correspondingly inflates its causal significance, and thus systematically over-estimates its actual ability to transform the socio-economic order."<sup>35</sup> Mills identifies as a chief merit of his interpretation that on his rendering, Marx's "ideology" concept would provide better support for the project of articulating a Marxist ethics than do other rival interpretations of "ideology."

*That* Marx and Engels think of morality as an ideal phenomenon whose character is explained by the material base, and that they rebuke moral philosophers' tendency to overexaggerate the usefulness of extolling moral principles and pronouncements, is unquestionably the case. Perhaps quite unsurprisingly, I agree with Mills (1994) that these views held by Marx and Engels are perfectly compatible with the attempt to seek "an objectivist revolutionary morality that self-consciously *recognizes* its material roots in the economic 'revolutionary tendencies' of a situation, and that has no propensity to exaggerate its likely causal efficacy."<sup>36</sup> Mills argues that his account would have the virtue of leaving the door open for a Marxist morality touting itself as *nonideological* and therefore not subject to the harsh criticism Marx doles out to morality at numerous points throughout his corpus. The defense would be that Marx was strictly discussing those varieties of morality that happen to be ideological and was not speaking out against nonideological forms of morality.

But even with accord reached on some of these points regarding the nature of Marx's and Engels's critique of morality, the question still remains whether Mills is correct that "ideology" is best understood as a term used to describe theory that is deluded about its own sources and the rather narrow limits upon its socially transformative possibilities, rather than as a more neutral descriptor of consciousness and of systems of ideas that emerge within class societies.

The problem for Mills's 1994 interpretation of Marx's ideology concept, however, comes when we notice that the account Marx gives of the development of ideology is *also* his account of the emergence of *any* and *all* ideal aspects of social Being. In a writing later published posthumously as part of

*The Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write that, “We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the *ideological* reflexes and echoes of this life process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.”<sup>37</sup>

If what makes a certain idea or system of ideas count as ideological is that it is an idea that obscures its own basis in materiality, and that it is an idea that appears to be much more causally efficacious than it actually is, these are sufficient conditions satisfied by the vast majority of ideas in the vast majority of heads in the great, vast majority of people. And that tendency toward idealism is not simply a matter of maintaining better or worse theoretical hygiene on an individual level; the lesson we are to draw from Marx's and Engels's critique of ideology is that the world of capital is set up *precisely* in a way that reliably and necessarily produces exactly this mystifying effect.

Mills's proffered solution to the problem, his suggested path toward a “nonideological” Marxist morality, is itself, in the end, idealist. It falls into the very trap it promises to help us navigate our ways out of. If we have the right *ideas* about revolutionary morality, if we develop a morality that “self-consciously *recognizes* its material roots,” then we can free ourselves from the material circumstances' tendency to produce ideology and in fully escaping the mystifying tendencies of capital, we can thereby land upon a morality that is nonideological. I submit that this solution succumbs rather readily to the familiar pitfall of which Marx tried, perhaps here in vain, to warn us.<sup>38</sup> It places entirely too much faith in the power of the right ideas to free us from the mystifying effect that our alienated material conditions of life have upon our consciousness. And so while Mills's 1994 discussion of ideology is in numerous respects quite clarifying and sharp, its central argument does not make it seem any less like folly to speak of nonideological consciousness within the context of class society.

In a later work, his 2003 *From Class to Race*, Mills rejects his 1994 account of Marx's ideology concept and argues in its place that all aspects of the superstructure are inherently ideological. Mills points to a passage in *Theories of Surplus Value* where Marx speaks of “state officials, military people, artists, doctors, priests, judges, lawyers” as workers who produce “‘immaterial’ [in other words, *ideal*] commodities.” In light of this, Mills updates his position so that his “claim now is that for Marx and Engels all of these can be

described as ‘ideologists,’ since they work in the ‘ideal’ superstructure and produce ‘ideal’ products.”<sup>39</sup> They work in fields, and under conditions, that tend to foster the illusion that their ideas spring from their own genius, when in fact, their ideas are shaped by external material processes of which they persist largely unaware.<sup>40</sup>

One of Mills’s targets in this later treatment of the ideology concept is a view he attributes to Joe McCarney, among others, which holds that “ideology” is a neutral and not pejorative concept in Marx’s theory.<sup>41</sup> It is one we brought under consideration earlier in the present chapter. In his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that when studying social revolution, “it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production . . . and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”<sup>42</sup> And as we noted earlier, this passage seems to support an analysis of the “ideology” concept on which ideological forms are not inherently reactionary just in virtue of their being classed and ideological.

Throughout the 2003 piece, Mills seems to conflate two different senses in which “ideology” could be a pejorative concept. On the one hand, one might mean that “ideology” is identical with thoroughly reactionary bourgeois consciousness. On the other hand, one might mean that “ideology” captures the sense in which ideas sometimes obscure and mystify the reality of material relations. In reaching his later conclusion about Marx’s concept of ideology, Mills concludes that if all aspects of the superstructure are ideological for Marx, then (a) “ideology” is an unhelpful concept for distinguishing bourgeois from proletarian consciousness because they are both ideological, and (b) ideology is not to be understood as mystification since *all* consciousness is ideological including ostensibly true and clarifying proletarian consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

But Mills reaches each of these conclusions too quickly. He points to rather crude and doctrinaire attempts to denounce the “ideological” character of bourgeois consciousness. He argues, sensibly enough, that this charge is meaningless if proletarian consciousness is *also* necessarily ideological, as would follow from the claim that *in general*, all superstructural forms in class society are inherently and necessarily ideological. In this, Mills suggests that to reject “the one-dimensional, class-reductionistic, and ultimately quite absurd polarization of (Marxist proletarian) science versus (non-Marxist bourgeois) ideology” would be a novel move in the legacy of Marxist thought, a



kind of theoretical advance in the tradition. But this is not the case; in Marx himself we see serious and sensitive engagement with bourgeois theory, famously, for example, in the cases of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and of Adam Smith. Marx's hours upon hours in the Reading Room of the British Museum were spent poring through the writings of precisely those bourgeois producers of "immaterial commodities," often to critique and at least as often, to gather insight into the real nature of capitalist relations. Many a Marxist has been known to read a bourgeois newspaper or two—critically, yes, but not simply to dismiss every word within its pages as so much nonsense. As I detailed in the first part of the present chapter, there is just not much evidence for the claim that the Marxist tradition discards *all* bourgeois thought production as worthless mystification.

As for the second conclusion, that ideology is not to be understood as mystification, this is also too quick. Ideology does, in part, mystify. One of the chief lessons of *Capital* is that capitalism's economic relations of production necessarily mystify our understanding. This is not a doctrine that ought to plunge us into skepticism and despair. It is a call to action, a reminder that passive contemplation makes us especially susceptible to these mystifications and that therefore, as Marx noted in the second of his *Theses on Feuerbach*,

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth—i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.<sup>44</sup>

As much insight into the nature of existence as it is possible for us to gain today, the conditions do not yet exist for fully objective knowledge of the world. The correct way to understand the relationship between bourgeois and proletarian consciousness is not as a distinction between "ideological" (uniformly empirically false) and "nonideological" (uniformly empirically true) thought. The distinction is instead a theoretical confrontation between the consciousness of a class whose interests are *served* by mystification, and the consciousness of that class of people who, if they are ever to be free, must come to see the world just as it is.<sup>45</sup> This contradiction finds expression in thought but it cannot be resolved in thought. As I have written elsewhere,



The movement from fracture to wholeness, from particularity to universality, is something that must be eventually produced; and that product will be the result of a political project accomplished by the proletariat as a revolutionary subject in the course of human history, seeking emancipation from its own exploited, alienated, and degraded condition. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels refer to the proletariat as “the class that holds the future in its hands.” It is the proletariat’s specific capacity to dissolve social antagonisms and produce a society in which the flourishing of each conduces to the flourishing of all, that lends the character of universality to its perspective. In the proletariat’s historical task, the opposition of particular and universal interest is not merely theoretically and philosophically, but practically and politically overcome.<sup>46</sup>

One legacy of the Analytical Marxist tradition that is represented not only in Mills’s reading of Marx but in *most* Anglophone academic work on Marx, is the refusal to encounter Marx on his own methodological terms. Indeed, the Anglophone academy has by and large regarded such refusal as a *prerequisite* for any mature philosophical engagement with Marx’s ideas, all with predictable results. Writing in 2000 of the methodological approach taken in his 1978 book *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*, Cohen explains,

All analytical Marxism is analytical in the broad sense, and much is analytical in the narrow sense. In each sense of “analytical,” to be analytical is to be opposed to a form of thinking traditionally thought integral to Marxism: analytical thinking, in the broad sense of “analytical,” is opposed to so-called “dialectical” thinking, and analytical thinking, in the narrow sense of “analytical,” is opposed to what might be called ‘holistic’ thinking. The fateful operation that created analytical Marxism was the rejection of the claim that Marxism possesses valuable intellectual methods of its own. Rejection of that claim enabled an appropriation of a rich mainstream methodology that Marxism, to its detriment, had shunned.<sup>47</sup>

Some members of the Analytical Marxist current that coalesced around G. A. Cohen in the late 1970s went so far as to dub themselves scholars of “No-Bullshit” Marxism.<sup>48</sup> The “bullshit” in question? None other than the beating heart of Marxist theory and practice: dialectics. It is by neglecting

the central role of dialectics in Marxist theory—that is, by attempting to excise from Marxism his attention to the whole inner conflict and development of existence, and by regarding apparent theoretical contradictions mainly as philosophical puzzles to be dissolved through abstract conceptual analysis, that one flattens Marxism into pat, platitudinal nonsense, then finally to dismiss it from the halls of “serious” philosophical endeavor. Unsurprisingly, this was precisely the trajectory of most of the key figures in the Analytical Marxist school.

James Furner diagnoses the collapse of Analytical Marxism quite correctly in his 2018 book *Marx on Capitalism*. He writes,

One reason to undermine the self-told narrative around Analytical Marxism's disappearance is to embolden other Marxist projects. Cohen's account of Analytical Marxism's disappearance is that Analytical Marxism's Marxism led to its undoing. By contrast, . . . the analytical constraints of Analytical Marxism led to its undoing.<sup>49</sup>

So, of course it is absolutely correct that Marx does not dismiss all ideology as inherently bourgeois in character, always upholding and legitimizing the dominance of the ruling class. Rather, Marx argues that in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and its class nature play a primary role in shaping the ideas of the age. This does not mean, however, that Marx thinks it is either possible or desirable to function or to think “nonideologically” in a class society.<sup>50</sup> An ideology is a system of ideas developed in order to make sense of social contradictions. As such, it is completely necessary that the proletariat develop its own ideology and engage with such ideological forms as morality and political theory. In the *Manifesto*, Marx writes that “the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”<sup>51</sup> For the proletarian movement to be self-conscious is precisely for it to work out, ideologically, its present situation, its aims, and the best means by which to attain its ends.

### **Moral Suasion and Marx's Anti-Utopianism**

One way in which Marx's approach to ethics differs from others is that, since historical materialism predicts that people are likely to do that which they

perceive to be in their own material interest, the making and accepting of ethical arguments is not very effective on its own for producing real change and for that reason is not, in and of itself, a priority.<sup>52</sup> Worse, to the extent that ethical arguments do tend to be persuasive when made, it is because they ratify and reflect a dehumanizing reality and demand that those in whose interest it would be to revolutionize society sacrifice themselves before it, instead.

These criticisms of morality's role in class society receive special attention in Marx's critiques of utopianism. In contemporary literature, Marxism is often referred to as a utopian theory. However, both Marx and Engels were very vocal about the distinctions between their scientific and revolutionary method, and the idealist methods of what they considered to be utopian forms of socialism, such as those espoused by the so-called True Socialists. Instead of engaging in political activity and looking to the existing economic and social situation to identify which elements in the existing society are in a position to change society, utopianism, Marx and Engels charge, depends on the greatness of an idea to compel people to action through its own intellectual appeal.

In his 1948 article "German Utopianism: 'True' Socialism," Auguste Cornu writes,

The "true" socialism which arose in Germany between 1843 and 1847 was the specific form which utopian socialism took in that country. It came into being when modern capitalism was taking shape in Germany and was closely related to French socialism, which had arisen half a century previously, at the time of the bourgeoisie's coming to power in France. . . . Utopian socialism did not perceive the internal contradictions of capitalism, which engender economic and social crises, nor was it able, in view of the weakness of the proletariat, to envisage the class struggle as a means of emancipation. It therefore failed to find in society itself the source of the solution for the problems raised by the development of society. . . . Instead of showing how the future emerges out of existing society, it set up a sharp contrast between the present, which is nothing but disorder and injustice, and the future, in which harmony will reign. . . . While thus contrasting a future ideal society to existing society, utopian socialism endeavored to show how that ideal society must of necessity realise itself merely as a result of its rational and moral superiority.<sup>53</sup>

As Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto*, the “True Socialists”

consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favored. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society? Hence, they reject all political, and especially all revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavor, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel.<sup>54</sup>

The True Socialists (Karl Grün, Hermann Semmig, Edgar and Bruno Bauer, and others) are exemplars of this sort of utopianism, arguing that the communism of Marx and Engels is inferior to their theories because Marxist theory does not rely solely on moral motivation as a means to bring about communism. Semmig, for instance, argues for socialism as an “anarchic system” which would rely on “the moral core of mankind,” and accuses communists of having failed to achieve “free moral activity.” However, this “moral core of mankind” is left completely unexplained and undefined. How exactly it would bring about communism in a historical situation in which so many factors militate against it, is anyone’s guess, especially as the True Socialists opposed the kind of liberalizing bourgeois reforms that could serve to overthrow feudalism and produce conditions within which communists could more effectively organize.<sup>55</sup>

The appeal to a “moral core” fails to explain the real process through which socialism might be achieved. In this way, Semmig’s *mere moralism* provides cover for a lack of political clarity. The “free moral activity” that he looks to as a way for human beings to effect the transition from class society to socialism is activity undetermined by the real concrete historical situation. Semmig “abandons the real behaviour of the individual and takes refuge in his indescribable, inaccessible, peculiar nature.”<sup>56</sup> However, while human beings can imagine themselves as totally free, undetermined beings, in fact, they act in conditions and in circumstances that do not at all depend on their free choice, and their actions are in this way therefore partially determined by external, concrete historical circumstances which must be taken into account in any conception of how communism might

be attained. The particular circumstances in question, in the context of Marx's disagreements with the True Socialists, were those of the German bourgeoisie's struggle against feudalism, and for liberal reform, in the early part of the nineteenth century.

In refusing to extend conditional support to the German bourgeoisie's struggle against the German aristocracy and for democratic reform, the True Socialists, Marx argued, had merely attempted to warm over an approach to social change that was already inadequate when developed earlier, and in a more sophisticated manner, by utopian French socialists such as Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon. Marx described Semmig et al. as writers "who have absorbed a few French and English communist ideas and amalgamated them with their own German philosophical premises."<sup>57</sup> But in the absence of a vibrant workers' movement in Germany at the time of their writings, the attempt to transform the ideas of utopian French socialism into a distinctively "German" ideology could only deteriorate into an abstract, petit bourgeois retreat from struggle and into pure theoretical abstraction reflecting the "petty circumstances of the artisan."<sup>58</sup>

Marx and Engels respected the work of "critical-utopian" socialists such as Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen, but thought it crucial to understand the latter's work as both visionary and yet limited in that the conditions they sought to interpret were ones in which working-class struggle remained in its nascency. In the *Manifesto*, Marx writes that "the proletariat, as yet in its infancy, offers to [Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, et al.] the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement."<sup>59</sup> As such, the French utopian socialists of this period could well be forgiven for theorizing the proletariat as "the most suffering class" and not as an active, transformative force capable of revolutionizing society. Still, Marx insists, the Utopians were mistaken to reject revolutionary action; the mistake is compounded as class struggle heightens and sharpens, and yet certain thinkers—such as the True Socialists—cling to a perspective that omits the self-activity of the working class and relies instead on the persuasive power of reason alone, intending to win the ruling classes over to the cause of socialism.

In his 2002 paper "Marx's Critique of the Utopian Socialists," Roger Paden argues that Marx's critique of the Utopians is nonetheless unsuccessful. Paden refers to the view that Marx and Engels criticized the Utopian socialists for indulging in mere moralism as the "Strategic Criticism." He writes,

On this interpretation, the Marxist criticism of the Utopian socialists is based on the idea that, while Marx and Engels shared their ends (their vision of the general shape of the ideal society) and were, therefore, Utopians themselves, they believed that the means the Utopian socialists proposed to attain those ends were insufficient. . . . There are a number of problems with this criticism of the Utopian socialists. Perhaps most important, it overestimates the possibility that violent revolution can produce a truly ideal society, while underestimating the power of moral criticism. Moreover, it falsely portrays people as simple victims of the dominant ideology and/or as completely controlled by their narrow economic and class interests. However, this rejection of the power of moral argument to motivate people has been shown to be false by the history of Marxism itself, as it has been moral arguments that have moved many people from a variety of social classes to join this cause. It also underrates the ability of Utopian visions—including Marxist utopias—to cause people to seek political change. History suggests, therefore, that, although small scale utopias are perhaps doomed to failure and although sudden violent revolutions can sometimes succeed, there are no good political reasons to reject in principle gradual, morally-motivated utopianism.<sup>60</sup>

I will address the problems Paden sees in the criticism of mere moralism as a strategy for social change one at a time. Paden's first objection, that criticizing the Utopian socialists for indulging in mere moralism gets things wrong about the relative efficacy of violent revolution and moral criticism, has at least two problems as far as I can see. The first is that the revolutionary means Marx prefers to mere moralism cannot simply be boiled down to "violent revolution." Paden effectively indulges in a sleight of hand, replacing what is in Marx's and Engels's writings a description of a long and difficult process, with the idea of a "sudden violent revolution" which Paden invokes as though such an event is to contain within itself all that would be required for a transition to communist society. In doing so, Paden dramatically oversimplifies the political program that Marx and Engels promote in their writings and practice in their own political activism. This program includes the organization of masses of people to enter into a political fight for legal reforms, as well as struggles within the workplace for better wages and working conditions, and of course, efforts at political education and the dissemination of revolutionary ideas. It is true that it would be a mistake to assume that *mere* "violent revolution" would be any more effective at bringing

about communism than issuing moral commands to society at large would be, but this is also not what Marx is saying and the interpretation on which his critique of Utopianism criticizes the Utopian socialists for their mere moralism need not be committed to such a view. In fact, as mentioned above, Marx's critique of the "True" Socialism, French Utopianism's intellectual descendant in Germany, was rooted precisely in the fact that its adherents were insufficiently *supportive* of liberal, bourgeois reforms.

When Marx and Engels write of the need for revolution, their point is that only the proletariat can radically restructure society in the way that is necessary for communism to be achieved. Thus, the argument for political revolution—a transfer of political rule from one part of society to another—as a means to achieve communism is tied together with Marx's and Engels's identification of the proletariat as the progressive, existing force within society that can realize communism. Paden would be well within his rights to disagree with Marx and Engels that this is true of the proletariat. Yet insofar as he provides no argument to that effect, he does not provide adequate support for his decision to dismiss out of hand the idea that revolution might be necessary for communism to be realized and that mere moralism might not do the job.

Additionally, with respect to Paden's first objection, Paden seems to overlook that Marx's and Engels's belief that revolution may involve violence is based on the fact that the bourgeoisie is quite certain to violently oppose and suppress any attempts to infringe upon private property and bourgeois rule. It is not that Marx and Engels think violent revolution, taken abstractly, has some inherently progressive potential, considered in isolation from specific historical circumstances. (A "violent revolution" undertaken by a small, politically isolated sect would be nothing more than foolhardy adventurism.) Rather, Marx and Engels do both seem to think that for the working class to be successful in its revolutionary or often, even in its merely reformist aims, it must be prepared to survive the brutally and violently reactionary forces that have historically been deployed to defend capital, from the Freikorps in Germany, to the Pinkertons in the US, to Pinochet's DINA in Chile. I can see no reason to think it *prima facie* just up for grabs, as Paden seems to, that "the power of moral argument" might be enough to see the working class through such tough times.

Paden's second criticism of the kind of view I attribute to Marx and Engels is that it wrongly assumes that people's actions and beliefs are strictly determined by their economic class interests. Who, after all, is to say that a



member of the bourgeoisie might *not* be swayed by moral argument alone? But I don't think that reading Marx and Engels as critics of the mere moralism of the Utopian socialists in any way commits one to the view that moral argument can *never* bring a person around to the view that communism is desirable unless she already has economic interests that would be served by it. Certainly, Paden is quite right that historically, people from a range of social classes have been convinced of the need for communism and sometimes through moral argument. Marx and Engels may have been better aware than most that one need not actually be a member of the working class in order to be convinced of the need for communism. But Marx and Engels do think it is a mistake to advocate mere appeal to human beings' moral sentiments without taking into account what their economic interests are and whether those interests are better served by the maintenance of the status quo or a transition to a different type of society. To interpret Marx's and Engels's critique of mere moralism as a criticism of the view that moral argument alone can bring about communism does not require one to show that no one ever responds to moral reasons even where they go against one's self interest. Rather, the question is whether mere moralizing alone can ever galvanize the majority of society in the way that would be required for a transition to communism; anyone who believes that it might owes us some argument for that.

Marx distances himself from the issuance of moral injunctions as ways, in and of themselves, to close the gap between what "is" and what "ought" to be. His and Engels's "scientific socialism" does not share the same difficulties as "true" or utopian socialism when it comes to the question of rational motivation because it is not opposed to the needs of individuals, but rather is theorized as a means of recognizing and satisfying those needs. It identifies as the revolutionary class that class which, because of its position in economic production, is already brought into conflict with the forces of capitalism through its struggle for its own continued existence. Moral calls for altruistic sacrifice become necessary for a political theory when the link between rational self-interest and the prescribed course of action can no longer be demonstrated through reason.

The flourishing, development, and well-being of human individuals guides Marx at every stage of his philosophical work and is the basis of his outlook on morality. He argues both that it is the highest goal for human beings, and that it provides the standard by which moral theories should be judged. When Marx criticizes specific moralities, it is not because he has abandoned any moral conception whatsoever. Rather, what rival theories



represent abstractly as a desirable state of affairs is, for Marx, a goal to be aimed at through practical revolutionary activity, not merely wished for in systems of moral injunctions. As he writes of Max Stirner, the mistake is in thinking that

the communists want to “make sacrifices” for “society,” when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves.<sup>61</sup>

So, if all of that is the case, then what is the role of a book about the Marxist approach to ethics—an approach that, in Marx’s own work, was tinged with everything ranging from indifference to outright disdain? My aim is not to produce an absolute calculus of right action, a decision procedure spitting out moral judgments about every conceivable human dilemma. In fact, insofar as what I offer in these pages is a guide to action, it will be because part of what I offer is an outline of how we might determine which actions are such as to further the cause of human emancipation. But which ones will or will not is itself an empirical question to which a definitive answer can only be given in the course of revolutionary practice.

Throughout the present chapter, I have alluded to a distinctively proletarian perspective on the world. In Marxist theory, that perspective is the materialist conception of history, a perspective from the point of view of labor. This is the topic of Chapter 3, “A Historical Materialist Account of Human Nature.”

## 3

## A Historical Materialist Account of Human Nature

One of my central theses in this book is that according to a Marxist approach to ethics, we ought to do that which promotes human flourishing. It follows that in order to know precisely what we might be called upon to do in practice, we must know something of what it is to flourish *as* a human being. It further follows that we must have some account of what it is to be a human being in the first place. A Marxist account of human nature is therefore central and foundational for getting clear on Marx's vision of what it would be to abolish our alienation from that nature and achieve reconciliation with it.

However, if "human nature" is the sort of thing that can be resolved into a discrete list of fixed traits and dispositions had by all human beings at all times, then Marxist theory offers no such thing. Marx consistently and vehemently rejects what he sees as earlier attempts to characterize human existence in such a fixed and abstract manner: he is highly critical of doctrines that mistake specific determinate historical expressions of human potential as eternal, unchanging, universal features of human beings. And yet as I will argue over the course of this chapter, Marx does offer what we may reasonably consider to be his own account of essential human nature, a rival to those he rejected. In fact, Marx's entire theoretical framework is rooted in, and made sensible by, his historical materialist account of what it is to be human.

One might—especially if one has been raised in the modern Anglophone philosophical tradition—reasonably wonder how an account of human nature could be relevant to morality. By going down that road we might, after all, find ourselves in grave peril of committing a naturalistic "is–ought" fallacy of a kind with what David Hume, among others, are taken to have so strenuously warned us against.<sup>1</sup> "What *is*," one might protest, "is war, strife, competition, egoism, poverty, and want!" Human nature, as actually expressed

throughout history, often does not look very good. So it is not unreasonable to maintain skepticism that what *is* might give us any real guidance as to what *ought* to be.

But this insistence upon a stark disconnect between what *is* and what *ought* to be is itself utterly alien to Marx's theoretical method. It is precisely denied by his and Engels's materialist conception of history, itself an heir to Hegelian dialectics which has as one of its tenets that actually obtaining conditions already contain within them the possibility of their overthrow (their "negation," to adopt Hegel's term). The dialectical method that Marx and Engels adapted from Hegel has, as another of its tenets, that a thing's phenomenal appearances express a nature that can be known by observing the alteration of those appearances under changing conditions in history, and drawing valid conclusions about what determinate nature might give rise to such appearances. ("Essence," Hegel tells us in the *Science of Logic*, "appears."<sup>2</sup>) Thus, Marx and Engels emphasize attention to movement, dynamism, process, and history as the absolute cornerstone of scientific inquiry into the real nature of things. It is, according to the materialist conception of history, impossible to know a thing except by observing it in motion and dynamic interaction.<sup>3</sup>

As for what *is* today, what exists is not just sheer capitalist dystopia. We do not exist in a world that is shaped *only* by capitalists promoting capitalist ideas, building capitalist institutions, and enforcing capitalist property relations. We live in a world in which capitalists have an overwhelmingly significant role in determining human reality; but try as they might, their rule over humanity is no settled fact. It is an ongoing, unfolding battle they must wage every day against the working classes who, in resisting capitalist domination and struggling for the conditions of human survival, play their own key role in determining the course of human history. Of all capitalism's innovations, its greatest historical achievement is to have forged the proletariat that digs class society's grave. It is this practical contradiction between capital and labor, its dynamic unfolding under changing historical circumstances, that increasingly draws the whole of humanity into a single, central conflict. The sharp, ever more all-encompassing character of this battle creates, as a material reality, the possibility of observing the species as a totality in motion, one riven by internal conflicts whose expression under different circumstances over time grants us insight into the nature of the species as one whole. What do we see?

For Marx, it is always an error to attempt to develop an account of what human beings are by essentializing and universalizing their habits, interests, and values just at some particular given point in time. Any of these is a particular contingent *appearance*, just one way among many in which human nature might manifest. When we speak of a Marxist conception of human nature, it is not any particular appearance to which we refer, nor even to some large set of these separate appearances taken together. Essential human nature is a complex of *all* these myriad appearances and of the process that yields these separate appearances and makes such a wide and varying array of them possible at all. That process is labor: human beings' goal-directed intervention into their natural and social environment, an intervention that humans initiate in order to satisfy their needs, and through which they necessarily transform their environment and themselves in the process.<sup>4</sup>

Human nature, for Marx, is best understood not just in terms of what we are at some given moment in time, but crucially, in terms of the generative activity through which we produce, reproduce, and necessarily transform and expand what it is that we are and might become. This is what he has in mind when he writes, in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, that "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."<sup>5</sup> What human beings essentially are cannot be understood by us except by engaging in the process of transforming ourselves and, in doing so, realizing it is precisely our capacity to consciously self-change that constitutes and gives rise to our conditions of existence. And this is an activity that is only made possible through social coordination, interaction, and interdependency. Hence, as Marx continues in the sixth of his *Theses*, "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."<sup>6</sup>

As much as it has become something of a truism of moral philosophy in the analytical tradition to insist that it is always fallacious to deduce an "ought" from an "is," this notion descends precisely from a Humean positivism that is directly at odds with Marx's dialectical materialism. (For that matter, we don't even have to get all the way to Marx to find key figures in the history of philosophy who would have found this view strange—the insistence that there is an "is-ought fallacy" doesn't much square with Aristotelian virtue ethics, either, given that the latter rests on a theory of human nature and of the conditions of flourishing for beings with that nature.)

If, for all we know, what *is* bears no necessary connection to what precedes or follows it—if all we can say of what *is* is to describe what *appears to be* at some one particular time-slice—then indeed it would be quite a mystery how we could derive normativity from that. But if aiming, striving, goal-directedness—if *generation, life, and process* in fact *are* part of what *is*, then at least one cannot be so sure that it is simply a kind of category mistake to suggest that what is already contains, even if only in embryo, what ought to be. In this sense, a Marxist approach to ethics can be understood as an attempt in part to recoup the loss, described for example in Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, inflicted by liberalism's repudiation of the Aristotelian notion that there is a shared, universal, objective, and knowable human nature from which normative claims can be derived about how human social life ought to be arranged.

Indeed, arguments for the purportedly “amoralist” character of Marxist theory frequently diagnose it as embracing a Nietzsche-esque nihilism. This is a point MacIntyre raises and that Paul Blackledge later revisits in his 2012 book *Marxism and Ethics*, a very much MacIntyrean reconstruction of Marxist ethics. There, Blackledge argues that rather than nihilism, “Marx's ethics amounts to a modern version of Aristotle's account of those practices underpinning the virtues through which individuals are able to flourish within communities.”<sup>7</sup> The failure to appreciate the normative character of Marx's theory is then diagnosable as a consequence of the relative sidelining of Aristotelianism within the modern moral tradition, a circumstance that renders many frankly unable to know ethical theory when they see it.

The brief sketch provided above, of a defense for deriving an “ought” from an “is,” might strike some as excessively teleological. We will address that concern at length in Chapter 5, on freedom and determinism. But here, as we move into the next sections of the present chapter, I will explain the character of human nature as it figures within Marx's ethical vision. First, I will explain what distinguishes Marx's account of human nature from crudely biologicistic accounts that really would be irrelevant to ethical questions. Next, I will demonstrate how one incorporates a historical materialist account of human nature into ethical reasoning. Lastly, I will address the objection that perhaps communism simply demands much more than what is made possible by essential human nature. It is true that human beings as we exist now would be very ill-suited to a fully developed communist society, indeed. But the promise of communism lies precisely in that we might yet make of ourselves more than what we so far have been.

### Biological and Social Being in Marx's Account of Human Nature

In keeping with Marx's methodological materialism, his ethical vision is derived in the first place from an assessment of what human beings are and what, given their nature, is beneficial to their flourishing.<sup>8</sup> But Marx does not believe it is possible to determine morality based merely on humans' *biological* being and *biological* needs. So when I say that Marx's ethical vision takes human nature as its starting point, I certainly do not mean to reduce human nature to a collection of merely biological facts about members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Such a crass form of biologism would conceive of human nature and of human needs too statically and narrowly. It would not account for the ways human beings continually transform their conditions of existence by altering their material production and thus their own consciousness, and in turn their own nature and their needs.

However, neither would it be right to say that the biological nature of *Homo sapiens* is irrelevant to morality. Social being (human existence as it is produced and transformed historically by human activity)—and natural, biological being, form two moments of a single dialectical unity of human nature. Yet natural being plays a fundamental and ontologically prior part.<sup>9</sup> In his book *Ontology of Social Being*, Georg Lukács puts this point in the following way:

Social being cannot be conceived as independent from natural being and as its exclusive opposite . . . The objective forms of social being grow out of natural being in the course of the rise and development of social practice, and become ever more expressly social.<sup>10</sup>

Humans are natural beings in the sense that they are biological beings of a certain sort. In particular, they are mammals, with a particular anatomy, particular metabolic processes, and particular history of evolutionary development that has led to their emergence as a distinct biological species. As natural beings, humans require such basic materials as food, water, shelter, breathable atmosphere of a particular chemical composition, and so on, in order for their biological processes to go on—that is of course to say, they need these things in order to live. Insofar as human beings require food, water, and the like, human beings are largely indistinct from animals. But the respects in which they are distinct matter quite a lot. Marx writes:

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic and so on. All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life.”<sup>11</sup>

Marx argues that the essence of human existence is the labor process. Labor is the essential activity through which human beings intervene consciously and purposively into the natural world and the processes unfolding within it. It is the activity through which they intervene in and transform their own relationships to nature and to one another as human beings.<sup>12</sup> In *Capital*, Marx describes the labor process in the following terms:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. . . . We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects

a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike animals, which engage in their animal behaviors without conscious awareness of what it is to act *as* members of their species, human beings are what Marx calls “species-beings.” Humans possess a conception of themselves as a species and are able to act in accordance with it.<sup>14</sup> Humans can understand what necessary conditions must be fulfilled in order for their species to survive and, more than that, to thrive, realizing its present capacities and developing new ones. Further, human beings can also produce in accordance with the standards of other species, understanding their conditions of flourishing and providing for them accordingly. From agriculture to pet care, humans are able to behave in such a way as to promote and direct the processes of nutrition, growth, and reproduction that occur within other animals. What’s even more, humans can self-consciously direct their activity so as to produce in accordance with conceptual abstractions such as beauty, as for example, when they produce art. In his 1844 “Estranged Labour” manuscript, Marx explains the difference between animal and human activity thus:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity; it is that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. *Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being.*<sup>15</sup>

As a dynamic process, as an activity, human nature is not some ghostly *something* lurking in the heart of every person, or standing “behind” the myriad appearances of human existence. Rather, it inheres in the complex of that whole wide range of appearances that human activity assumes. As we saw in the previous chapter, Marx raises the point that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”<sup>16</sup> In order to determine the essence of human existence, Marx assesses a concrete totality of determinate instances of human activity and social relations. Through analyzing these varied examples as they appear in the course of history, Marx determines what is common to each of those instances and what gives rise to them and explains their emergence and decay.



As we have already noted, central to Marx's ethical vision is a thesis that contemporary moral philosophers frequently reject out of hand: that from a claim about what *is* the case for essential human nature, we may derive claims about what *ought* to be the conditions of human existence. Essential human nature—which is for Marx, the labor process—is itself not neutral with respect to its outcome. Its aim is always already the satisfaction of human needs and the preservation of human life. We ought, Marx argues consistently throughout his writings, to recognize this aim as our own and act so as to realize it. Ethical questions are always ultimately grounded in empirical investigation as to what conditions are in fact likely to promote the flourishing of creatures such as us.

Since for Marx, human nature is the complex of all human activity, everywhere, past and present, taken as one whole, it is therefore dynamic, constantly developing and constantly transformed as human beings act and produce in different ways. Marx writes in *Capital*, in “acting on the external world and changing it, [man] at the same time changes his own nature.”<sup>17</sup> Out of this concrete totality of human activities and social relations, it is possible to develop an abstraction that is valid for each of these concrete appearances. That abstraction is the labor process. Marx sees labor as the conscious intervention of human beings into the world, setting causal processes into motion in order to realize ends that they first posit in thought.<sup>18</sup> Marx argues that this teleological realizing of ends is the essence of human existence—it is what distinguishes human beings from other forms of life not just theoretically but in the practical sense that it is through this process that human beings make their form of life more and more distinct from any other species. It is the practical basis upon which human existence develops in its diverse and dynamic appearance.<sup>19</sup>

Alan G. Nasser, in his 1975 paper “Marx's Ethical Anthropology,” writes of the connection between this conception of human nature and Marx's ethical critique of capitalism. According to Nasser,

We are told that if the worker were to be functioning in an “exclusively human” way, his production would “[realize] a purpose of his own.” But in fact, as a *wage-laborer* his ability to produce is used to realize the purposes of the capitalist, for whom the worker's life-activity is a use-value. Under capitalism, the teleological character of human labor is the private property of the capitalist class.

That the capitalists' pursuit of their class interests prevents workers from exercising their human *ergon* is regarded by Marx as an *unethical* state of affairs.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, what sort of condemnation other than *ethical* would be appropriate in this context, given Marx's adherence to a normative anthropology? For it has been the historical role of *ergon*-based anthropologies to support claims concerning what is ethically good and bad for men. . . . It has been suggested that "The slanted interest, charged language and acrid tone of *Capital* imply not moral indignation, but simply outrage at the conditions of exploitation."<sup>21</sup> But such "outrage," voiced in reference to an explicitly stated normative anthropology, and constituting a systematic network of commendations and condemnations, is precisely what counts in the Western philosophical tradition as *moral* indignation.

It should also be noted here that on Marx's view, capitalists are *also* alienated from their essential human nature. In pursuing their class interests, capitalists frustrate not only workers' human flourishing, but their own. Capitalists' scope for action is limited and determined by economic laws that operate beyond their control, even though those laws are themselves produced by human activity and social relations. (We will return to this point in the following chapter, where Marx's concept of "alienation" will be our topic.)

Whenever Marx evaluates the moral status of an economic formation, a political system, the role of a group or collective, or the specific actions of one individual person, he does so within the context of an abstract and universal conception of human social existence, that is in turn derived from an analysis of the concrete totality of human social being.<sup>22</sup> Marx asks whether or not the action, principle, political movement, etc. in question is such as to promote or to inhibit the expansion of human powers and the satisfaction of human needs. Put differently, in order to know the ethical status of a thing, one must know whether or not it helps human beings to realize their nature. And for Marx, humans are naturally social beings who satisfy their needs and transform their existence consciously through the labor process. However, to identify what will and will not promote human nature is no mean feat. I do not intend to make it sound obvious or apparent, simply on the basis of an abstract philosophical apprehension of human essence, which human actions will fit that bill.

Marx's account of human nature is in a certain sense, quite "thin." He does not think that human beings are necessarily or ineluctably selfish, altruistic,

competitive, fallen, vicious, or any other of a whole host of characterizations that other theories have posited as necessary and permanent features of human nature. Technically speaking, everything a human being has ever been or done constitutes part of human nature. But then it is fair to ask: once we have ascended “from earth to heaven,” as Marx and Engels put it in *The Critique of the German Ideology*, abstracting a very plastic and dynamic human essence out of the concrete totality of determinate appearances, how do we get back down again to make specific claims about how human beings ought to behave in the concrete?<sup>23</sup>

That move downward is mediated by different levels of abstraction between essential human nature that is universal to all human beings, and any given particular, concrete historical situation.<sup>24</sup> We approach historical questions assuming that human beings are always at least indirectly producing their own conditions of existence when they produce in order to satisfy their needs. However, that presupposition is obviously quite general and human production can take on any of a wide variety of specific forms. So in evaluating a concrete historical situation it is not enough to know merely that human beings produce their existence through the labor process.

No human being acts in conditions of absolute knowledge. Yet in seeking to determine what is morally right or wrong in a given situation, we must gather as much information as possible regarding moments of the concrete totality of social existence in which one acts. In short, a historical materialist appraisal of human social existence is a prerequisite for accurate normative judgments. Here is a nonexhaustive description of some of the most important aspects of reality that we must investigate, in order to determine what is morally required at a particular historical moment.

In addition to knowing that human beings produce their existence, we must also determine how that production is carried out. We must know the mode of production of the relevant society in which the ethical determination is to be made. We must know whether there is a division of labor and if so, how labor is divided. Furthermore, we must know what stage of development a society is at within that mode of production. This is an empirical question about the economic organization of a society. To answer that empirical question, we have to investigate such matters as: Who takes part in economically productive activity? Is this a hunter-gatherer society where people mostly consume what is found ready in nature? Are human beings actively intervening into nature to direct its processes, as in an agricultural society? Has production become more highly regimented and socialized, made

vastly more efficient by the innovations of industrialization? We then need to examine how goods are distributed once they are produced. Is a surplus created? If there is a surplus, how large is it, and who controls it?

We also need to know what material resources society has at its disposal and how these might allow a transition to a higher stage of society—that is, one more amenable to the realization of human nature. It is merely utopian, Marx argues, to advocate a new type of society without properly identifying exactly which forces within the old society make such a transition and development possible and how those forces can be directed toward such a transition. A social transformation can only be genuinely moral at a point at which the elements exist with which to realize it.

We need to know what if any classes exist in the society and what the balance of forces are among them. The notion of economic class is itself an abstraction out of a totality of individual human actors within an economic system. In the case of capitalism, we often see this economic system depicted as one in which autonomous individuals interact with one another as equals, bringing different wares to market—sometimes corn, sometimes their own labor power. However, when we evaluate the dynamics of this system, we see that in fact, these individuals relate to the market in different ways. More closely examined, these “free” and “equal” individuals tend to belong, by virtue of their relation to the capitalist market, in one of two broad categories: those, on the one hand, who buy labor power, and those, on the other hand, who sell it. And whether you are the capitalist who buys labor power in order to produce commodities she can then sell to increase her profit, or the worker who has nothing to sell but his labor power in order to satisfy his private needs, your actions are not so “free.” Instead, they are determined in significant ways by the economic laws that govern the movement of commodities in such a society. And these actors are not so “equal,” because those who live by buying labor power and amassing profit tend to have the upper hand over those who live by selling their labor power daily and thereby building the store of accumulated dead labor which rests in the hands of the capitalist.

So in determining what an actor ought morally to do within a given historical situation, we must determine the class membership of the particular historical actor in question. We must then also ask whether her actions promote the interests of her class and how those class interests stand in relation to the interests of society or of humanity taken as a whole. We need to know the level of organization of that class, whether it has become conscious of

its interests, and whether it has developed a political leadership capable of advancing its group interests.

We need to know the nature and breadth of the individual person's scope for action. To determine this, it is important to understand the historical factors that have led up to the moment in which she acts, as well as to know the individual's own personal qualities and capacities.

The investigation into each of these questions will proceed from an understanding that each of these aspects of social being has arisen out of a long process of human beings producing their own existence through their active adaptation to the world in which they live. However, in order to derive specific, concrete moral claims out of this abstract and general principle, we must understand the particular manner in which this essence is realized, and then the manner in which it is distorted, frustrated, or limited in the various historical formations that have arisen out of the process of human self-changing.

It may sound as though it is an awfully tall order, to need to know so much about the historical context in which an agent acts. But the point is that to say with a high degree of accuracy what is morally required in a given historical situation, we need to know as much of this context as possible *and* we need to understand it in a manner informed by categories such as "class" and "economic mode of production." Only then can we understand how all the parts of this totality interact with one another and form a developing whole into which human beings can consciously and rationally intervene. With regard to morality, what it means to say, as Marx does, that "when reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence," is that we cannot make accurate moral claims without investigating the concrete historical situation as thoroughly and systematically as possible.<sup>25</sup> Philosophy continues to exist as part of our knowledge, but there is no longer a hard and fast border between philosophical knowledge and the scientific knowledge of society and nature. It is superseded and subsumed within historical materialism. And so I wholly disagree with, for example, Philip J. Kain's argument in his 1984 paper "Marx and the Abolition of Morality," that for Marx, "only science can be justified, not morality. Moral judgments cannot be empirically verified and they are not true or false." The question: What is to be done? is answered by determining what, in a particular situation, is most likely to promote the realization of human nature. This is something that can be determined empirically via the method I have sketched here.

What is moral at a given point in time depends on a whole range of determinate and historically emergent factors. While Marx does think that in the present historical moment, human beings ought to work to promote communism, this view does not entail or imply that the promotion of communism has been the morally right activity for humans to engage in at all historical times. To make such a suggestion would be to illegitimately abstract from the specific historical circumstances which first make communism possible only at a certain stage in the development of capitalist production. As Marx argues, to call for the immediate implementation of fully developed communism at a time when the historical forces do not yet exist with which to achieve it is hopelessly utopian. It is also merely utopian even to call for communism at a time when it might be achieved, but while proposing impotent means such as mere moral suasion, which is unequal to the task of realizing a communist society.

In order to draw the conclusion that human beings ought to promote communism, Marx does not abstractly imagine what ideal future society would best suit human beings as he imagines them to be. Instead, he examines how the alienation of humans from their essence leads to a debased, limited existence for human beings and even threatens continued human existence of any kind. He examines the economic tendencies already existing within capitalism that lead to greater rationalization and socialization of human production. These provide the basis for greater conscious control of human beings over their own powers. He looks to the existing workers' movement and its political and economic aims, and how the achievement of its aims would affect the entire society of which it is a part. Communism, as Marx tells us, is not an "ideal to realize," but an already real and existing movement within capitalist society, which human beings can and should work to promote.

Adopting Marx's ethical vision, it is possible to make moral judgments not just about what a class or society as a whole ought to do, but also about individual agents and their actions. Again, in evaluating the actions of a particular individual agent, in order to answer the question of what this person ought or ought not to do, we have to understand the relevant historical context. We need to know what paths for action are actually open to her, and how her individual actions are likely to make an impact on the historical situation in which she acts. The greater the historical import and potential of her action to either promote or inhibit the realization of unalienated human nature, the greater the moral significance of that action.

Early in his career, Marx writes that for human beings there is an imperative “to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.”<sup>26</sup> Within human social arrangements that promote the domination of things over people and of man over man, it is always possible to ask what can be done to do away with this debasement, and how any particular action relates to the struggle to overthrow it. The answer to the question of how a person should act is determined by assessing empirically the conditions in which she acts, and the potential of her action to promote the further realization of essential human nature. This abstraction is itself determined empirically by assessing a concrete totality of human history and existing social relations. In this sense, Marx’s method for determining what is moral or immoral at a given historical moment is a scientific method, and one that can provide guidance in individual action, a commonplace expectation of ethical inquiry.

In the 2018 edition of his *Why Marx Was Right*, Terry Eagleton writes,

As far as religion goes, it is worth pointing out that there have been Jewish Marxists, Islamic Marxists, and Christian Marxists who champion so-called liberation theology. All of them are materialists in Marx’s sense of the word. . . . Marxist materialism is not a set of statements about the cosmos, such as “Everything is made out of atoms” or “There is no God.” It is a theory of how historical animals function.<sup>27</sup>

Well, yes and no. It is true that Marx’s materialism is a theory of human beings in their historical development. It is also true that Marx does not explicitly espouse any version of atomism and that he is resolutely hostile to pronouncements on the existence or nonexistence of God. However, Marx’s refusal to entertain metaphysical questions of that type does not imply that he was amenable to any answer whatsoever that one might wish to give them. If Marx saw little value in denying the existence of God (and indeed, he saw no value at all in statements of this kind), it is because he saw still *less* value in raising the question of God’s existence to begin with. And *this* is a judgment from which positive assertions of God’s existence can hardly escape.

Marx’s impatience with atheism was based in his critique that it was *still too religious*. This is why Marx wrote in an 1842 letter to Arnold Ruge, “I desired that, if there is to be talk about philosophy, there should be less trifling with the label ‘atheism’ (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogey man).”<sup>28</sup> Atheism is



“religious” because, like theistic belief, its assertions outstrip the possibilities of what, on Marx’s view, can be scientifically known by human beings. In a contribution to the 2019 Routledge *Companion to Atheism and Philosophy*, I wrote,

For Marx, not even the natural world has an existence independent of human beings, for it is so thoroughly conditioned by human action. As we saw earlier, for Marx it is this actuality of practical engagement with the natural world that makes it objectively knowable for human beings.<sup>29</sup>

So yes, it is true that Marx’s materialist conception of history is a theory of how human beings, we “historical animals,” to adopt Eagleton’s phrase, inhabit the world and produce and reproduce ourselves in the world. But Marx’s anthropocentrism commits him to the principle that a theory of worldly human social existence is, *a fortiori*, also a theory of the world. It is not simply that we cannot *know* what lies beyond. There is simply no “beyond” of which we can sensibly speak. It is for this reason that, in opposing his own materialism to Ludwig Feuerbach’s, Marx writes in a passage on Feuerbach that was later published posthumously as part of *The Critique of the German Ideology*,

Feuerbach speaks in particular of the perception of natural science . . . Even this pure natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men. So much is this activity, this unceasing sensuous labour and creation, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists, that, were it interrupted only for a year, Feuerbach would not only find an enormous change in the natural world, but would very soon find that the whole world of men and his own perceptive faculty, nay his own existence, were missing. . . . The nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin) and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach.<sup>30</sup>

If Marx’s materialism leads him to a certain skepticism regarding humans’ capacity to know the non-human-inhabited natural world, that alone puts us in a position to well imagine how he might regard supernatural claims about the eternal divine, or even attempts at inquiry into such matters. But



does this make Eagleton incorrect to assert that there are Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Marxists? I don't think it does; historiographically, it would not be a very valuable endeavor to scour the record for all who have taken up the banner of Marxism, organized for workers' liberation, and understood and combatted capitalism's dehumanizing, exploiting destruction of humanity, and then use their relationship to religious tradition to rigidly impose some litmus test of strict Marxist orthodoxy. I think Eagleton is of course correct that there are countless Marxists in each of these traditions. But for those whose relationship to religious tradition involves some belief in the supernatural, or the rejection of the principle of "Man as the highest being for Man," no, it cannot be said that they are materialists *in Marx's sense of the word*. In this, anyway, they are at least in good company with most of the self-professed atheists who claim Marx's materialism.

### Human Needs

The satisfaction of human needs is an important part of Marx's moral conception, so much so that Agnes Heller, in her 1974 book *The Theory of Need in Marx*, went so far as to suggest that in Marx's economic theory, "the concept of need plays one of the main roles, if not actually *the* main role."<sup>31</sup> Those needs, according to Marx, develop and expand as human powers and the sophistication of their social production increases. Marx regularly invites his reader to keep in mind that the prerequisite for any more complex or sophisticated form of social existence is that humans' basic natural needs for food, water, shelter, etc., first be satisfied. Yet as social beings, humans have not only their strictly biological needs, but also needs that come about as a result of humans' attempts to satisfy those biological needs and the complex of needs that arise historically out of that initial pursuit.<sup>32</sup> In producing according to their existing needs, human beings not only satisfy those needs, but also create new needs, the fulfillment of which impose new requirements, setting the process into further motion as human beings then develop new forms of production to meet their new needs. This relationship between the presence of human needs and their role as a spur to further creativity and thus, to further expansion of human powers, is what inspires Andrew Chitty's remark, in his 1993 essay "The Early Marx on Needs," that "human needs are constitutive of our essence as human beings."<sup>33</sup> If we take into account that for Marx, having a need is not a passive state but rather one moment in a

mutually reinforcing and co-constitutive dialectic of needing and creating, then we will have the right picture in mind.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx refers to these needs, “historic needs—needs created by production itself,” “needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse,” as “social needs.” Social needs, the “needs created by production itself,” have their basis in the natural needs toward which production was historically first directed and which must still at present continually be satisfied. As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*:

The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, [is that humans] must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history.” But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.<sup>34</sup>

And since those natural needs for food, drink, shelter, etc. are directly determined by the characteristics of humans as natural beings, it is right to say that human biological being plays a fundamental role in determining the development of social needs. However, it is not the case that social needs are in any way simply reducible to natural needs, and it would also be foreign to Marx to regard natural needs as the “real needs,” and the social, historically arisen needs, as somehow less genuine. Marx provides a specific example of how basic, biological needs give rise to increasingly *social* needs in his discussion of a group of French workers.

When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association, society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.<sup>35</sup>

These workers' need for higher wages in order to ensure continued access to food and housing gave rise, in the struggle against their bosses, to a need for solidarity with fellow workers. This socially produced need is no less a genuine need for human beings than is the biological need for food. To the contrary, for Marx it is precisely such socially produced needs that *most* fully express a distinctly human character.

In his 2011 book *Why Marx Was Right*, Terry Eagleton summarizes the lesson of this passage in the following terms:

The best things are done just for the hell of it. We do them simply because they belong to our fulfilment as the kind of animals we are, not out of duty, custom, sentiment, authority, material necessity, social utility or fear of the Almighty. There is no reason, for example, why we should delight in one another's company. When we do so, however, we are realising a vital capacity of our "species being." . . . Human solidarity is essential for the purpose of political change; but in the end it serves as its own reason.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, there are all sorts of good reasons that it belongs to our dynamic and evolving nature, as human beings, to be—or in any case, to come to be—the sort of creatures that crave sociality. In going about the business of creating and recreating the conditions of everyday material life, we produce and reproduce our longing for the company of one another. Eagleton's point is that Marx describes a form of life in which the question "Why be in fellowship with other human beings?" requires no other, further answer pointing beyond the intrinsic desirability of companionship, itself.

Marx writes that the significance of communism as a goal for human beings is that it will realize "a new manifestation of the forces of human nature and a new enrichment of human nature," thereby laying the material basis for the realization and development of existing capacities and the appearance of new ones, and corresponding needs.<sup>37</sup> Under capitalism, Marx argues, human beings are so separated from the natural world and from their own species-being (their own particularly human mode of interaction with the natural world, i.e., the labor process and interaction with its products) that their needs as human beings are limited to bare subsistence—and often, not even as much as this.

Under capitalism, a person's needs have no effective capacity to be fulfilled unless that person has money to fulfill the need. For workers, particularly, their needs are reduced to just those needs that must be fulfilled in order for

their work to be done. As Marx writes, "It is not only that man has no human needs—even his animal needs cease to exist."<sup>38</sup> A central element of Marx's opposition to capitalism is that it limits the development of human beings by inhibiting the fulfillment of human needs and in so doing, also limits the range of existing human needs to needs only for the barest essentials. Capitalism bars humans from the kind of relationship to the natural world and the products of their labor that would create more sophisticated forms of human interaction with their environment, closing down the development of corresponding new needs, as well. As Lukács pointed out in his book *Ontology of Social Being*, this inhibition of needs is tantamount to the inhibition of human nature itself.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Marx argues that in class society, human production is carried out in an alienated manner. Instead of being directed consciously and rationally by human persons, labor—what labor is performed and how it is performed, and who performs it—appears determined by economic laws that operate independently of anyone's control. In class society, and particularly in capitalism, this basic teleology in the conscious life activity of human beings is disrupted. The person who carries out the work of realizing a product may have no ideal representation of the work at all. The worker produces not in accordance with a standard that she has consciously set for herself, but rather produces as part of an extended process that appears not to be determined by any human rationality or human goal-positing at all, but instead, by abstract economic laws of supply and demand. The work, as a result, begins to lose its human character, a process accelerated by the character of work itself, which becomes increasingly odious to the worker—a denial and a sacrifice of her human existence, rather than a realization and expression of the human being in the external world.

This disruption of the basic teleology in the labor process occurs not only for the industrial worker producing in a fashion dictated by the laws of the market. Rather, it takes place in all manner of human activity, including intellectual and political activity. Operating within class society, human beings behave less as individual actors, and more and more as exemplars of this or that class. Class actors behave in manners dictated to a great extent by the economic and social system of which they are a part.

The question arises, then, of how that teleology is disrupted and how it comes to be the case that economic laws, rather than human beings, govern production. This result comes about as human beings produce

and regularities begin to appear within that totality of human activity—regularities that are neither fully understood nor controlled and which come to develop the appearance of external laws of production. Thus, a world that human beings have produced actually appears to be independent from and hostile to human beings (we can say, human beings become alienated from their own product, the social world). The essence of social being, which is the labor process as conscious life activity, is mediated by social forms so that it no longer appears as the product of conscious life activity and the developing complex of teleological goal-positing and production by concrete human individuals. Instead, it comes to defeat the teleological aspect which is a normal part of the labor process and of conscious life activity. For an example of this, one might consider the demonstrated incapacity of humanity at this point in history even to cease sowing the seeds of its own impending destruction. Dominated as it is by the profit motive, our society refuses to address the environmental crisis that threatens to wipe out human beings on Earth altogether. Even the most simple, basic aim of human beings to safeguard our continued survival is thwarted by social arrangements that inhibit the ability of humans to act rationally and effectively in accordance with that goal.

The solution to this disruption, Marx thinks, is to bring the appearance of social being into accordance with its essence. This means that production must be brought under the rational, conscious control of human beings. And for that to occur, without regularities in human production taking on the appearance of disempowering and objectionably determining social laws, social production must be coordinated socially, and directed not toward profit, but instead toward the creation of a society in which the free development of each is the precondition of the free development of all. What I am describing here in Marx's thought is the transition from capitalism, to the transitional stages of socialism and, eventually, to fully developed communist society.

It is important not to interpret Marx's vision of this future society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" as some Marxian "end of history." Instead, Marx argues that class society constitutes the *prehistory* of the human species, and that only with humanity's rational control over its own powers and over the natural world of which human beings are a part (which would itself include the abolition of the opposition between humans and the natural world), can an actually *human* history begin to unfold. Marx refers to this in the *Critique of Political Economy* when he writes:

The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence—but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.<sup>40</sup>

With the resolution of this antagonism, the material basis for moral theory as a way to theorize the gap between human existence as it is, and human existence as it ought to be, will also disappear; morality and moral theory, as such, will no longer exist. We will return to this theme in Chapter 9, "The Abolition of Morality," so here, I will only note that although this doctrine may seem unusual, it should not seem at all surprising, given Marx's historical materialism. Morality as such is universal and objective, yet also thoroughly historical. It emerges at a certain point in the historical development of the world, and will eventually also pass away.

### **The "Rich Individual" in Marx's Ethical Vision**

In addition to analyzing other moral theories, Marx, over the course of his writings, develops a distinctively historical materialist ethical vision based on human beings "in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions," and the requirements that must be satisfied in order to bring about the circumstances in which we might see what Marx calls the "all-sided development" of "rich individuality."<sup>41</sup> Marx examines the goals of such important struggles as the French Revolution and considers how they represent the highest consciousness about what is necessary in order for human beings to preserve the historical gains of class societies and move closer toward an "all-sided development." Based on his understanding of these struggles, their aims, and their historical role, together with his understanding of human nature, Marx draws the conclusion that man is the highest being for man and that human development itself is therefore the most important goal for human beings. In his criticisms of other moral theories and of existing class society, his standard becomes clear. A moral philosophy must promote the continued existence of humanity, the preservation of its cultural heritage in all its diversity and

achievements, and the “rich individuality” and “all-sided development” of human needs and capacities.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx asserts the desirability of

the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one.<sup>42</sup>

Marx argues that one of the aims of human social existence is for human beings to bring increasingly much of the natural world and more of their own social relations under their conscious, rational control. That ability of human beings to extend greater control over themselves and over the natural world is a key aspect of bringing about their “all-sided development.” The extent to which labor is carried out as a mere means to life or as life-activity itself is another key aspect of the all-sided development of human beings. In alienated labor, the essence of man’s social being, labor, is converted into a mere means for the maintenance of his continued existence as a biological being with merely natural needs. The extent to which those natural needs, such as, say, the need to eat, have been transformed into social, historically arisen needs is a further marker of the extent to which this all-sided development has taken place. For instance, for an early human being, the need to eat may have had hardly any other appearance than the simple need for plain fruit or flesh. Today, after centuries of social development, it may appear as the need for adequate access to affordable grocery items and the tools to carry out appropriate culinary preparation. Here, we can say that a “historically created need has taken the place of a natural one.”

When Marx refers to the “rich individuality” that could first be developed in communist society, he refers to the human being in whom human essence has been brought into accordance with human appearance. Instead of appearing as a debased, limited creature, hampered and controlled by economic laws, the human is an essentially social being with a capacity for in-principle unlimited development through the labor process. She also *appears* to be so in a society in which the natural world and the social sphere have been brought under human beings’ conscious and rational control and directed on the basis of human needs. The existence of human persons as

individuated beings at all, is itself the result of social production, a point Marx makes when he says that man “is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society.”<sup>43</sup> Only at a certain stage in the development of production can human beings emerge as individuals, rather than merely as “herd animals” pursuing goals and interests that are narrowly subordinated to the struggle for bare survival.<sup>44</sup>

It is on the basis of these aspects of Marx's view that Erich Fromm writes, in his, *Marx's Concept of Man*,

Marx's aim was that of the spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determination, of restituting him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature. Marx's philosophy was, in secular, nontheistic language, a new and radical step forward in the tradition of prophetic Messianism; it was aimed at the full realization of individualism, the very aim which has guided Western thinking from the Renaissance and the Reformation far into the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

Dynamism and processual development are key elements of essential human nature that is stunted in a society that does not allow human beings to satisfy their full range of needs and develop an unfolding array of human powers in the natural world. Marx calls for the abolition of human beings' alienation from essential human nature and more specifically, of their alienation from the world they themselves have produced. This is a call for labor to be carried out in accordance with human essence. As conscious, purposive activity that increases and develops humanity's command over the external world and over himself, and is directed toward the satisfaction of human needs and development of human powers, such a reconciliation of essence and appearance, Marx argues, would usher in the beginning of truly human history.

This view of human nature responds to one of the most common criticisms of Marxism's vision of a future world in which the flourishing of each is the precondition of the flourishing of all. That is the view that human beings are essentially selfish and competitive, in ways that make such a communist society utterly infeasible, and “idealistic” to even imagine. Political philosopher David Estlund has referred to this as “the human nature constraint.” He characterizes this commonly held position (which he himself rejects) as follows:



A normative political theory is defective and thus false if it imposes standards or requirements that ignore human nature—that is, requirements that will not, owing to human nature and the motivational incapacities it entails, ever be satisfied.<sup>46</sup>

Leaving aside whether or not the constraint is legitimate in itself, let us nonetheless concede that for Marxism at least, it would be damning if it were to turn out that human nature ensured the practical recommendations of a Marxist normative political theory could never be realized. This is a special vulnerability of a Marxist moral theory, because its entire *raison d'être* is not theory as an end in itself, but rather the concrete, practical, lived, bringing-to-fruition of those remedies which the theory recommends. Marxist moral theory is only meaningful when combined with practice in the dialectical unity of praxis. If Marxist theory cannot ever be realized because human nature is intrinsically such as to necessarily preclude it, then the theory is itself a failure, as its validity is rooted in its claim to a correct understanding of human existence in the world, from which claims about how humans *ought* to exist in the world, follow.

In navigating the challenge set forth by the “human nature constraint,” we can see a great part of what hangs on the essence/appearance distinction. At least for those of us who live in present-day, capitalist, market-driven Western societies, it is disingenuous to pretend that skepticism about whether communism could ever work for people such as ourselves is always unjustified. In fact, *it couldn't* work for people like us; not even Marx thought that it could. The case for communism's feasibility hangs crucially on the question of whether the greed, antagonism, and selfishness that predominate in capitalist society are fixed and ineradicable features of human life.

Marx's argument for a communist society is that such a society is best suited to our nature. But how can this be, when even he acknowledges that human beings, as they exist in capitalist society, are not yet suited to communism? Again, we must appeal to the distinction between human nature at the level of essence, and at the level of appearance. On Marx's view, a communist society is morally desirable because it would allow human beings to develop their powers in a more all-sided manner than is possible today. The struggle for mere survival blocks many individuals from acting in ways that are not narrowly subordinated to the satisfaction of biological needs. Servicing the need for food, water, and shelter cuts them off from increasing their capacity to realize themselves in and through their natural and social environment.

Freeing humans from this struggle for survival (what Marx calls “natural necessity”) would allow them to express their essential nature in a more developed and fully realized manner.

For Marx, the feasibility of communism, the plasticity of human nature, and the case for revolution are all intimately and inextricably linked to one another. In their *Critique of the German Ideology*, he and Engels wrote,

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>47</sup>

A common complaint lodged against socialist thought is that when we look around, we find people who are selfish, racist, misogynistic, and perhaps possessed of many other undesirable traits that render them generally antisocial. Today such people seem hardly fit to function productively within a society based on values of solidarity and cooperation. Marx might agree. The future communist society he envisions is one that makes a radical break with all existing social relations. For such a society to be possible, human beings suited to that society must be created. Happily, human beings are constantly creating and transforming themselves as a species. What remains is for that process of transformation to be carried out in a conscious and goal-directed manner, with the aim of promoting prosocial traits, discouraging antisocial ones, and forming practices and institutions conducive to social collaboration and individual well-being.

Understanding essential human nature as humans' own power to intervene into natural and social processes and, consequently, into their own development, allows us to make judgments about what is conducive or injurious to the flourishing of this essential nature while also acknowledging that specific human traits vary over time, and that this variation in appearance has consequences for morality. Communist revolutionary activity, for instance, is morally required just at that stage in human social development when it is made possible. Communism is justified when the conditions of its possible success are in place. This is not the case at a time when all human beings live as hunter-gatherers, Marx argues. But it is the case now that capitalism

has transformed social production such that it is possible to produce enough to satisfy everyone's needs. In this sense, morality is "contingent" in that what is moral at a given time is in large part determined by existing material conditions and the current stage of human social development. What a communist morality requires of us today is not that we attempt to instantiate, today, the very habits and values that would prevail in that later society. This would be unfeasible, and at odds with Marx's entire approach. Rather, it requires that we act so as to transform our existing social relations, which we *are* capable of doing right now, as a correct understanding of essential human nature makes clear.

In Chapter 4, I explain Marx's account of what it is to be alienated from that human nature. Let us turn to that question now.

## 4

## Alienation

If in Marxist theory, human nature is to be understood not as a set of fixed traits but rather as an ongoing and generative process of human self-making, then alienation may be understood as that same process gone awry. For Marx, the truth that “man is the highest being for man” functions as an ethical ideal. This phrase is one of several Marx uses to describe what it would be for human beings to live in an unalienated way—that is, to be in full possession of their creative capacities and to embrace the furtherance of the in-principle limitless expansion of human powers as their highest aim.

To understand the alienation concept and its centrality in Marxist moral thought, it is necessary to distinguish heavily psychologized depictions of disaffection and ennui, with which we might be more familiar, from the materialist concept Marx deployed. For Marx, alienation pertains to frustrated or misdirected human productive powers. Alienation bears important psychological features and symptoms—ones that play an important role in motivating the working class to seek its abolition. Yet alienation is primarily to be understood as a feature of relationships among material beings: the relationship of humans to their products, of humans to other humans or to the species in general, and of any given human to herself.

Human beings are essentially social beings who produce their own existence through conscious, purposive activity in the labor process. When human beings are alienated from their essence, this process in which they consciously and purposively direct and produce their own existence is frustrated. Human beings’ products—material, social, and intellectual—take on a foreign and hostile character. Instead of furthering human aims, in alienation, the products of human labor thwart the intentions of their creators. Their products seem to exist independently, as though their emergence and development were not determined by human activity. The fact that these things have been produced through human activity, and can be controlled and directed through that activity, is partly or entirely obscured.

Alienation is contrary to, and impedes the development of, essential human nature.<sup>1</sup> Yet insofar as it is itself a result of human activity, alienation

is also an aspect and outcome of that nature. (To put this in more Hegelian terms: alienation is the active, practical negation of essential human nature, but also at the same time, itself one moment of the expression and realization of essential human nature. Essential human nature thus contains its own negation. Communism, that movement which abolishes the present state of things, is the negation of this negation and thus the positive realization of essential human nature.) It will not be enough, then, to offer moral approval or disapproval on the simple basis of whether any given activity, or social arrangement, is properly understood to be part of human nature. *All* human activities and products are aspects and expressions of human nature, including alienation itself as the frustration and distortion of that nature. The relationship of human nature to moral evaluation is not to simplistically rule particular behaviors and social arrangements as compatible or incompatible with human nature. Rather, the question is whether or not a given object of moral evaluation furthers or hinders the ongoing full, free, and conscious development of human creative powers. Some human activities and social forms are consistent with this aim and others are not.

The goal of abolishing alienation—of realizing human essence as the unalienated activity of labor—is *moral* in the sense that it is a claim about how human beings ought to live, and how they ought to treat one another.<sup>2</sup> This is a contextual moral principle. It is not a timeless, ahistorical goal. It exists as a goal only once human beings become alienated from their species-being, and only until the moment when they come to fully realize their species-being once again. Yet we must be mindful not to characterize the abolition of alienation as a simple return to an unalienated past. For Marx, as for Hegel, it is only through alterations to human existence realized in (and through) the development of history that the abolition of alienation can be achieved. In some ways it is a return—to life without economic classes and their attendant division of labor.<sup>3</sup> And in other profound ways, it is something wholly historically new.

Whether Marx retained this alienation concept throughout his early and later work is a matter of perennial debate among scholars of his work. One of the most influential discussants of this question is the French socialist theorist, Louis Althusser, who argued that to retain the alienation concept as a central category of analysis was “un-Marxist.” Althusser argued that in developing the theory of historical materialism and presenting it in his and Engels’s writings on Feuerbach that were later published, posthumously, as part of *The Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx abandoned his early humanism and

all of its trappings. Althusser asked: "Why do so many Marxist philosophers seem to feel the need to appeal to the pre-Marxist ideological concept of 'alienation'?"<sup>4</sup> He maintained that "Marx's youth did *lead* to Marxism, but only at the price of a prodigious break with his origins, a heroic struggle against the illusions he had inherited from the Germany in which he was born, and an acute attention to the realities concealed by these illusions," among these, the alienation concept.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that the abolition of alienation (or put otherwise, the practical realization of "man as the highest being for man," or the realization of essential human nature) is the highest ethical ideal for Marx. The question of whether Marx had a consistently ethical point of view throughout his career thus hangs on whether he consistently called for the abolition of alienation. In the coming pages, I will make the case that Marx remained consistently committed to the "alienation" concept as an ethical framework, even during those times when he shied away from calling it by that name.

Capitalism is not distinguished from earlier economic forms by the fact that the commodity-form exists. In earlier societies, human beings also produced items to profit from their sale. Capitalism, rather, is the economic system in which the commodity-form becomes the dominant mode of exchange (and eventually of human social existence altogether). There is a tendency under capitalism for absolutely everything to be converted into a commodity—up for sale, potentially alienable. The category of the alienable includes human beings' own capacity to perform labor, as the majority of human beings are compelled to take their labor power to market. In 2011, while arguing on the floor of the House of Representatives against wage protections for workers, United States Representative Steven King stated, "Labor is a commodity just like corn or beans or oil or gold, and the value of it needs to be determined by the competition, supply and demand in the workplace."<sup>6</sup> King was roundly—and rightly—criticized for justifying laissez-faire economic policies with this comment. However, it would be mistaken to deny that Rep. King made quite a succinct and accurate, if brutal, statement of a central principle of capitalist production. It is merely the approving formulation of what Marx had decried in 1844: that in capitalism, "the worker's existence is . . . brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity."<sup>7</sup>

The appearance of human beings as atomized individuals striving for the satisfaction of mere "egoistic need" develops hand-in-hand with the expansion and sharpening of alienation as a feature of the human condition.

Hungarian Marxist philosopher, István Mészáros, writes that in capitalist society:

Alienation is therefore characterized by the universal extension of “saleability” (i.e. the transformation of everything into commodity); by the conversion of human beings into “things” so that they could appear as commodities on the market (in other words: the “reification” of human relations); and by the fragmentation of the social body into “isolated individuals” (*vereinzelte Einzelnen*) who pursued their own limited, particularistic aims “in servitude to egoistic need,” making a virtue out of their selfishness in their cult of privacy.<sup>8</sup>

To satisfy one’s needs in capitalist society, one requires money. And whether capitalist or worker, in order to make money, one must sell something. Marx writes in “On the Jewish Question”:

Selling [*Veräußerung*] is the practical aspect of alienation [*Entäußerung*]. Just as man, as long as he is in the grip of religion, is able to objectify his essential nature only by turning it into something *alien*, something fantastic, so under the domination of egoistic need he can be active practically, and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity—money—on them.<sup>9</sup>

However, the sale of labor power to satisfy private, “egoistic” needs is particularly alienating in that “estranged labour reverses this relationship [between conscious being and species-being], so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential being*, a mere means to his *existence*.”<sup>10</sup> Labor under capitalism alienates the human being from his own essence, and changes “the life of the species into a means of individual life.”<sup>11</sup> Insofar as man’s essential nature as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, his ability to labor, is converted into a commodity to be sold in order to satisfy the private, egoistic needs of the individual, it is this inversion that Marx argues would (and should) be set aright in the transition to a communist society.

I focus my discussion primarily on the alienation of workers through the sale of their labor power. However, it is crucial not to ignore that both worker and capitalist are alienated in capitalist society. For Marx, everyone who lives

under capitalism has a life governed by anarchic laws and processes that operate beyond anyone's conscious direction or control. (Again, think here of the economic laws of supply and demand. These not only determine the fate of the worker, but also dictate to the capitalist what and how much is to be produced, and under what conditions.) Under capitalism, both workers and capitalists take part in human activity that is directed at the accumulation of profit as its highest end. Therefore, both are alienated insofar as they fail to recognize human development (the realization of human essence as an active adaptation to the environment through the labor process, and the ongoing and limitless development of human powers) as the highest aim for human beings, or to engage in practices reflecting the status of that aim.

A question arises. If both capitalist and worker are alienated in capitalist society, then why does Marx focus on the working class as a potentially revolutionary force in society, and not on the capitalists who apparently hold so much more power? Is this not arbitrary? The answer is twofold. First, Marx argues that because of their role in production, workers are uniquely positioned to redirect society's resources and to make human development the conscious aim of human production. Capitalism socializes the labor process, prompting relations of solidarity and cooperation to develop among workers. It is precisely the further development of such relations that would help contribute to the production of a society based on human solidarity and democratic control of the means of production. Relatedly, while it is not possible for every person to be a capitalist, it *is* possible to have a society in which the only economic class is the working class. The worker's conditions of existence are thus generalizable in a manner that would allow for the abolition of class society, as for everyone to be a member of the same class is for there to be no classes at all. Marx argues that it is the abolition of class society, together with a preservation and further development of the productive capacities developed in capitalism, that can provide the material basis for the abolition of alienation.

Secondly, workers and capitalists both experience alienation, but they experience it in decidedly different ways. As Marx writes in *The Holy Family*:

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman



existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature.<sup>12</sup>

It is this indignation and awareness of her own abasement that impels the worker to abolish the conditions in which she exists and to forge new ones in which her human nature is affirmed and expressed, rather than “outright, resolutely and comprehensively negated.” And as Marx writes in his essay “Comments on James Mill”:

*Labour to earn a living* involves: 1) estrangement and fortuitous connection between labour and the subject who labours; 2) estrangement and fortuitous connection between labour and the object of labour; 3) that the worker’s role is determined by social needs which, however, are alien to him and a compulsion to which he submits out of egoistic need and necessity, and which have for him only the significance of a means of satisfying his dire need, just as for them he exists only as a slave of their needs; 4) that to the worker the maintenance of his individual existence appears to be the *purpose* of his activity and what he actually does is regarded by him only as a means; that he carries on his life’s activity in order to earn means of *subsistence*. Hence the greater and the more developed the social power appears to be within the private property relationship, the more egoistic, asocial and estranged from his own nature does man become.<sup>13</sup>

The working class, because of its position in capitalist society, is capable of overthrowing the existing relations of production and because of its subjective lived experience of capitalism, can be rationally motivated to do so on the basis of its economic interests.

It is true that throughout most of the history of capitalist society, we do not see the overwhelming majority of workers consciously struggling together to bring about communism. However, workers have attempted, in various ways, to resist the oppressive conditions of capitalist society. They still do so, for instance, when they strike against low wages, demand shorter workdays, or fight to keep their pensions. At crucial points, workers can and do become revolutionary. Marx examines the history of those working-class struggles through the economic, political, and social contexts in which they are waged. He also develops a conception of human nature and of human needs that

is grounded in the real existence of individual human beings throughout history. Looking at human needs, and analyzing the content of workers' demands and determining what sort of society would be necessary in order for these needs and demands to be met, Marx argues that these needs and demands point toward the imperative to achieve a communist society.

Alienation under capitalism is a *universal* human condition. Workers, however, have a subjective experience of alienation as markedly oppressive and harmful in ways that those with greater access to society's resources do not typically experience. It is the universality of alienation as a human condition in class society that raises the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie from a mere battle between particular classes to a fight for universal human emancipation, making workers' interests and aims representative of universal human ethical imperatives.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will trace Marx's development of the "alienation" concept from his earlier works such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, through his middle period including the writings that make up *The Critique of the German Ideology*, and finally to the concept's appearance in *Capital*. We will discuss in finer detail how Marx's alienation concept figures into his larger theory and into his moral thought in particular. This will answer those who argue that Marx abandoned the alienation concept in his later work, or that it is possible to grasp Marx's theory without it.

### **"Alienation" in Marx's Early Writings**

*The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* constitute the *locus classicus* for Marx's account of alienation, and so this is where we shall begin in exploring his use of the concept in his earlier works. To grasp Marx's invocation of the "alienation" concept, it is useful to recall the term's economic significance in describing the transition from feudal to capitalist property relations, especially with respect to the ownership and transfer of land. Marx captures this in the "Rent of Land" manuscript, where he notes that under capitalism it becomes necessary that the "romantic" appearance of feudal relations

be abolished—that landed property, the root of private property, be dragged completely into the movement of private property and that it become a commodity; that the rule of the proprietor appear as the undisguised rule of

private property, of capital, freed of all political tincture; that the relationship between proprietor and worker be reduced to the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited; that all . . . personal relationship between the proprietor and his property cease, property becoming merely objective, material wealth; that the marriage of convenience should take the place of the marriage of honour with the land; and that the land should likewise sink to the status of a commercial value, like man. It is essential that that which is the root of landed property—filthy self-interest—make its appearance, too, in its cynical form. It is essential that the immovable monopoly turn into the mobile and restless monopoly, into competition; and that the idle enjoyment of the products of other people's blood and sweat turn into a bustling commerce in the same commodity. Lastly, it is essential that in this competition landed property, in the form of capital, manifest its dominion over both the working class and the proprietors themselves who are either being ruined or raised by the laws governing the movement of capital. The medieval proverb *nulle terre sans seigneur* is thereby replaced by that other proverb, *l'argent n'a pas de maître*, wherein is expressed the complete domination of dead matter over man.<sup>14</sup>

This is a key passage for us because keeping it in view will help stave off a tendency to psychologize the alienation concept and reduce it to merely personal subjective experience. Marx's alienation concept shares a lineage with that of thinkers such as Rousseau who wrote that "to alienate is to give or sell."<sup>15</sup> It also highlights the connection between alienation and the economic freedom that capitalism achieved as a victory against the constraints of feudalism. This was a precondition for the further historical achievements made by the bourgeoisie. This connection between alienation and freedom is a theme we will return to later when we address Marx's critiques of liberal morality. But let us now turn to what Marx does have to say about the worker's subjective experience of alienation under capitalism.

The economic concept of alienation takes on a distinctively normative significance when we note that on Marx's theory, alienation is not *merely* "to give or sell," but rather to be in a hostile confrontation with that which was formerly one's own. Instead of recognizing oneself in the alienated object, one encounters it as one does an enemy. We see this expressed in Marx's characteristically poetic style when he writes, in the "Estranged Labour" manuscript, that "the alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists *outside*

him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him.”<sup>16</sup>

In unalienated production, a person's products would be a confirmation and expression of individuality, free activity, and the ability to appropriate and transform nature to achieve human ends. Under capitalism, the worker's own product has an inimical character for him. It is produced not in accordance with the worker's own exercise of purposiveness and free agency, but rather as dictated by economic laws of supply and demand that operate in spite of him.

As a commodity, the product becomes added to the capitalist's store of “dead labor” of capital. Possessed now of a mass of stored-up accumulated labor, the capitalist is in a position to exercise even greater control over workers. Productive activity thus appears to worsen the worker's lot rather than improve it. His own essential power is at once also the engine of his degradation. As a result, “The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things.”<sup>17</sup>

If the result of labor under capitalism is the worker's alienation from his product, then, Marx reasons, the activity of labor itself must be a process of active alienation, since “the product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production.”<sup>18</sup> He writes that labor under capitalism is active alienation in several respects:

First, the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i. e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous

activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him—that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.<sup>19</sup>

In this description of the character of labor, Marx turns his attention from the worker’s product as accumulated or “dead” labor, to the character of the labor process itself. Labor is the essential form of free human activity, and the process through which human nature can be fully expressed in history. However, under capitalism, labor is so odious that the worker performs labor only because through the sale of his labor power can he satisfy his private needs. What should appear as the intrinsic aim of human existence is converted into its means. As the worker’s labor power is not his own, and belongs to a foreign power (the capitalist), labor appears as a denial and a sacrifice of the worker’s existence, and as something to be studiously avoided whenever possible.

Because labor takes on such an unattractive character, workers rarely recognize the labor process as the essence of human activity. Instead, they come to feel they are truly themselves only when at leisure, or while satisfying those needs they have in common with animals:

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.

Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But taken abstractly, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions.<sup>20</sup>

Insofar as humans are natural, biological beings, they have their natural needs more or less in common with other mammals. Their biological make-up is such that in order for the human species to persist and to flourish, human beings must have their biological needs for food, water, housing, and so on satisfied, and they must continue to propagate themselves as a species through sexual reproduction. But human beings are distinct from other natural beings in the means by which they satisfy these needs. Human beings,

through socially mediated labor, intervene consciously and purposively into their environments in order to satisfy their natural needs. In so doing, they transform both their environments and themselves, produce new forms of social interaction, and develop new powers and in turn, new social, historically arisen needs. They produce themselves not merely as natural, but also as social beings. In unalienated labor, human beings recognize this continual process of satisfying social, historically arisen needs and developing new powers as an end in itself and as the realization of human beings' essential nature as natural and social beings who satisfy their needs through labor.

In alienated labor, natural and biological needs are not regarded as the ontological basis for a limitless development of social, historically arisen needs. Instead, they are "separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends." The powers which have been developed in and through human history—capacities for language, for theorizing, for engineering, and so on—are converted into little more than new ways of satisfying man's natural, biological needs and of serving his "animal functions." As a result of the odious character of labor under capitalism, workers subjectively experience themselves in their "animal functions" as free and active, but experience themselves in their distinctively human functions as little more than animals.

While here Marx describes a subjective experience of alienation in labor under capitalism, it is important again to emphasize that alienation is not *merely* subjective. The objective relationship is between human beings and their essential nature as social beings who produce their own existence through the labor process. In alienation, this relationship is inverted and disturbed. The worker's subjective experience of alienation from his own essence as a conscious and freely active being arises from the real condition in which his activity is not his own. Marx writes of the alienation of labor:

This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life—for what is life but activity?—as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have *self-estrangement*, as previously we had the estrangement of the *thing*.<sup>21</sup>

And if the worker is alienated from his product and from himself, then, Marx argues, these things must have been alienated to someone else—to

other human beings. “Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. . . . [The worker] creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, what seemed to be a domination of things over human beings, turns out to be a social relation: the domination of capitalists over workers.

The alienation of the worker’s labor results in the possession of that labor by another human being. Marx argues that every “self-estrangement” is realized and expressed as a relationship between human beings. The worker “creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product.”<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that the working class alone has the capacity to abolish the dominion of man over man, and heed the categorical imperative to “overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.”<sup>24</sup>

I have discussed alienation as the separation of human beings from human essence, and as a condition in which human beings’ products appear to exist and to operate independently and in spite of human activity. The alienation of labor, for Marx, has both a subjective and an objective character. Workers labor under conditions that are odious and oppressive, and find themselves unable to direct their own activity freely, instead being compelled to sell their labor power in order to satisfy their needs. As a result, workers subjectively experience work as dehumanizing, and subjectively experience their “animal functions” as those in which they are really human and freely active. This subjective experience is based in an objective condition in which their labor belongs to and is directed by a foreign power: the capitalist.

Yet it must again be stressed that alienation does not only affect workers. Capitalists also experience alienation, albeit in a different form. They experience their decisions as dictated by economic laws of supply and demand, that appear to operate independently of human actors. However, because these economic laws can allow them to expand their financial wealth, capitalists tend to experience alienation as friendly and affirming, and as a phenomenon which affords them some “semblance of a human existence,” to invoke Marx’s remarks in *The Holy Family*.<sup>25</sup>

It is the sale of labor power and the proletariat’s active self-alienation that produces alienation for both capitalist and worker. Hence, Marx writes, “the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation.”<sup>26</sup> The workers cannot abolish their own alienation as a class without also

abolishing a society based on the separation of human beings from their essential human nature, or without abolishing the domination of one human being over another.

### **“Alienation” in Marx’s Later Works**

There is fairly broad consensus about the features of Marx’s account of alienation in his early writings. However, the oft-invoked separation of Marx into an “early” and a “late” Marx is founded in large part on the notion that Marx abandoned the alienation concept partway through his career, along with the ethical implications that come along with it. A number of commentators have taken the absence of the word “alienation” in most of the works of this period to suggest that Marx jettisoned the concept, perhaps because he found it to be incompatible with historical materialism as that method is outlined in the writings which constitute *The Critique of the German Ideology*. The claim that Marx jettisons the alienation concept is also part of the argument that there might be a moral dimension to Marx’s earlier work written prior to *The German Ideology*, but that this aspect of Marx’s thought is purged in a turn toward economic determinism that is alleged to take place in that work. But as I will show, while “alienation” (*Entfremdung* or *Entäußerung* in Marx’s German) does not appear in *The Communist Manifesto* or in most of Marx’s other major works between 1847 and 1857, alienation as a phenomenon and as a problem continues to play a central theoretical role in Marx’s thought.

While during this period, Marx does not often mention “alienation” by name, he does at many points between the years 1847 and 1857 describe the character of labor in terms almost identical to those he uses earlier when he calls that character “alienated.” Therefore, we must draw a distinction between Marx’s chosen *terminology* and his conceptual framework. He continues to invoke the alienation concept consistently to characterize and explain the ways in which human beings under capitalism are denied from pursuing an all-sided development of their nature. As Marx’s understanding of the relationship between alienation and human nature remains consistent, so does the moral critique of class society that emerges from it. This can be demonstrated by comparing remarks Marx makes about labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in the 1847 document “Wage Labour and Capital,” and in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*.



As we have seen, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* contains some of Marx's clearest treatments of alienation in his early work. In the manuscript titled "Estranged Labour," for instance, we learn that the alienation of labor is constituted by at least three things. First, the worker does not experience her work as an expression of herself. It is rather the activity in which the worker feels least like herself. Since for Marx the labor process is the essence of human existence, this phenomenon of experiencing one's own work as foreign amounts to experiencing oneself—one's own active essence—as foreign. It is also a phenomenon in which one's relationship to the external world is disturbed. This is because the labor process is a process in which the human being realizes herself as distinct from nature, and yet a part of it; she appropriates natural resources and transforms them into extended parts of herself and means by which to realize her agency.

Second, her labor is not an end which she pursues for its own sake, but rather merely the means to other ends. This second aspect of alienated labor is meant to follow from the first: because work appears so hateful to the worker, she would not perform it unless absolutely compelled to do so. As Marx later puts it in the 1875 "Critique of the Gotha Programme," labor appears as "a means to life," rather than as "life's prime want."<sup>27</sup> In capitalist society, because the worker has nothing to sell but her own labor power, and must sell *something* if she is to have money to eat, house herself, and afford all the rest of life's necessities, she is then compelled to sell her labor power. She therefore enters into a contract with an employer and transfers the ownership of her labor power from herself to another person in exchange for money.

As a result of this sale, there arises the third condition that is part of the alienation of labor: the labor that the worker performs is not her own, but belongs instead to another person. It is not the worker who teleologically posits ends which are to be realized through her labor, but rather, the employer. This real separation of the worker from her labor and therefore, from her essence as a consciously producing human being, serves as the material basis for, and the confirmation of, her experience of that labor as a denial of herself rather than as an expression of herself. It is this phenomenon of the self-denying character of labor under capitalism that leads Marx to describe this alienated labor as "self-sacrifice" or as "mortification." He consciously chooses religious language to describe alienated labor, thereby emphasizing the similarities between them, and how in both of these phenomena, the "spontaneous activity" of human beings falsely appears to operate independently of the beings whose activity it is.

I argue that Marx continues to theorize alienated labor after *The Critique of the German Ideology*, supposedly the point at which he abandoned alienation as a concept with which to describe and explain the character of human existence in class society. For instance, in the 1844 passage from “Estranged Labour,” which I have quoted above, Marx writes that the worker’s labor power “belongs, not to himself, but to another.” In the 1847 “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx writes that the worker’s labor power is part of his life activity which “he sells to another person,” and that it “is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another.”<sup>28</sup> In both passages, Marx describes a condition in which a part of the worker’s life activity has come to belong to an external person, who is not himself. This condition is realized through a sale of the worker’s labor power. In “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx goes on to write,

Labour-power is a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist. Why does he sell it? It is in order to live.

But the putting of labour-power into action—i.e., the work—is the active expression of the labourer’s own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labour itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another.<sup>29</sup>

Here, just as in the earlier “Estranged Labour” manuscript, work is not an end in itself, but a means by which to achieve ends which are external to it (namely here, simply maintaining one’s bare existence). The worker sells his labor power to the capitalist and thereby makes “a sacrifice of his life.” The strong parallels between this work, written after the writings that constitute *The Critique of the German Ideology*, and Marx’s earlier writings in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, are quite clear. In the 1844 passage, Marx calls this sale of the worker’s labor power a “self-sacrifice,” a “mortification,” and “the loss of his self.” In 1847, he calls it “a sacrifice of his life.” In both cases, the word “sacrifice” is used in an unmistakably purely pejorative sense. In 1844, “the worker’s activity is not his spontaneous activity” and “belongs to another.” In 1847, the worker “does not count the labour itself as a part of his life.”

Although labor power in action is life activity itself, for the worker, the exercise of that labor power comes not to be experienced or regarded as part

of his life and it comes to seem to the worker that it is the enjoyment of creature comforts that constitutes his “real life.” When labor is alienated, human beings experience themselves as most themselves and most human in precisely those activities in which they are least distinctively human. And why shouldn’t they, when the character of work itself is often so odious and mind-numbing that it fails to develop the worker as a full human being, and rather converts them into little more than a part of a machine? Marx describes this phenomenon in “Estranged Labour” and he does so again in “Wage Labour and Capital”:

And the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc.—does he consider this twelve hours’ weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours’ labour, on the other hand, has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc., but as earnings, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed. If the silkworm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker.<sup>30</sup>

Labor is so boring, so stultifying, so one-sided that while it is in reality the most human of activities, it is converted into machine- or animal-like activity. As Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, the only activities in which the worker truly does feel alive and “freely active” are in those activities which are not uniquely human at all, but which he shares with animals: eating, drinking, and procreating. And in “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx has a specific animal in mind: the silkworm, if a silkworm spun silk just in order to continue its worm-like existence.

While Marx does not use the word “alienation” in works such as the *Manifesto* or “Wage Labour and Capital,” in continuing to refer to the worker’s

separation from his own labor as a “sacrifice,” he does establish a clear terminological continuity between the two descriptions. There are also enough key similarities among Marx’s description of labor in works before and after *The German Ideology* to bring into serious doubt whether it might be reasonably maintained that Marx jettisons the alienation concept in his later work. It is far more likely that Marx made a terminological shift to avoid the possibility of his view being confused with those of others (such as Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner) who were also using the term “alienation” (*Entfremdung* or *Entäußerung*) at the time, but in different ways.

For Marx, the alienation that typifies class society can only be abolished once workers overthrow the existing relations of production, in which workers are compelled to “sacrifice” their labor power and to place it under the control of the capitalist class. In the place of capitalist production, Marx argues for a system in which workers would exercise democratic control over their own labor and regard labor itself as “life’s prime want”—a realization of their essence rather than an affront to it.

In prioritizing production aimed at private accumulation for its own sake over the interests of human beings themselves, modern society gets things backward, and this is one of the senses in which it is an alienating society. If consciousness can only be consciousness of social being, as Marx argues, then we can understand how in a society organized on the basis of production for its own sake, even at the expense of human beings, certain absurdities become intelligible or even, common-sense and “obvious.” For instance, that hundreds of workers should be condemned to misery and starvation because the factory can’t use them, anymore, becomes not absurdity or obscenity but good capitalist “common sense.” Capitalist society is alienating in that it deprives human beings of a correct understanding of their own place in the world and obscures the fact that “man is the highest being for man.”

In the *Grundrisse*, prepared between 1857 and 1861, more than ten years after “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx argues that in the ancient world, human beings were taken to be the aim of production. “The enquiry,” Marx argues, “is always about which form of property creates the best citizens.” In the modern world, this relation has been reversed.<sup>32</sup> Human life, that is to say, human labor, human creativity, ingenuity, sociality, etc., are all instrumentalized and treated as means to production. “Production for production’s sake,” as Marx puts it in *Capital*, but more precisely, the creation of surplus value, of profit, become the organizing principle of modern society.<sup>33</sup>

However, it must be emphasized that this “production for production’s sake” is not an unqualified bad, since it is that relentless drive toward production that has revolutionized society’s forces of production to an extent not even imaginable under previous economic systems. Alienation has been a feature of human existence long before capitalism, but capitalism has made it possible for alienation to finally be abolished. It is possible again to have a society in which production is carried out in order to satisfy the needs of human beings: one in which not merely a narrow band of the lucky and the well-born would enjoy some semblance of a human existence, but rather, in which a genuinely human existence would be possible for all human beings. Hence, it would be a mistake to simply long romantically for a return to the productive relations of ancient society. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*,

the old view according to which man always appears in however narrowly national, religious or political a determination as the end of production, seems very exalted when set against the modern world, in which production is the end of man, and wealth the end of production. IN FACT, however, if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual’s needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange; what is it if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature—over the forces of so-called Nature, as well as those of his own nature?<sup>34</sup> What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding of man’s creative abilities, without any precondition other than the preceding historical development, which makes the totality of this development—i.e., the development of all human powers as such, not measured by any previously given yardstick—an end-in-itself, through which he does not reproduce himself in any specific character, but produces his totality, and does not seek to remain something he has already become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?

In the bourgeois economy—and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds—this complete unfolding of man’s inner potentiality turns into his total emptying-out. His universal objectification becomes his total alienation, and the demolition of all determined one-sided aims becomes the sacrifice of the [human] end-in-itself to a wholly external purpose. That is why, on the one hand, the childish world of antiquity appears as something superior. On the other hand, it *is* superior, wherever fixed shape, form and established limits are being looked for. It is satisfaction from a narrow

standpoint; while the modern world leaves us unsatisfied or, where it does appear to be satisfied with itself, is merely *vulgar*.<sup>35</sup>

To address the limiting and alienating aspects of production under capitalism, it would be insufficient to advocate a return to antiquity or to understand the good human life as one that instantiates the virtues of a privileged class within an economic form that no longer exists. Rather, we must comprehend the lack of a “predetermined yardstick” for human development as what it is: a condition in which it has become possible to see that human development is potentially open-ended and limitless, and not as cause to abandon the notion of the human being and of human development as an end in itself.

As we also see in the passage above, closely related to the failure of modern society to recognize human development as an end in itself is its inability to allow, on a general scale, individuals to engage in an expansive and expanding array of activities. Across the whole society, taken as a whole, and in the many different types of human pursuits we can detect what Marx calls the “absolute working-out” of man’s “creative potentialities.” Yet the individual worker simply “reproduces himself in one specificity,” performing some particular task in the division of labor, while his capacity for other activities atrophies and withers away. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx describes this tendency in arrestingly vivid terms when he writes that capitalism

converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity, by forcing his detailed dexterity at the expense of a world of productive capabilities and instincts; just as in the States of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow.<sup>36</sup>

This is another aspect of alienation: an individuals’ scope of possible activity is narrowed under capitalism, unnecessarily and wastefully so. The machinery developed in capitalist society’s relentless push for production and wealth reduces socially necessary labor to a minimum, thereby creating the conditions for the emancipation of labor.<sup>37</sup> However, instead of being liberated through this more efficient production, the worker becomes a mere accessory to the productive process and to the machine. In this way, objectified labor, in the form of capital, confronts living labor, in the form of the worker, as the power which rules it. “The activity of the worker, restricted to a mere

abstraction of activity,” Marx writes, “is determined and governed in every respect by the movement of the machinery, not vice versa.”<sup>38</sup>

This form of alienation is also described elsewhere in *Capital*:

At the same time that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity. The lightening of the labour, even, becomes a sort of torture, since the machine does not free the labourer from work, but deprives the work of all interest. Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman.<sup>39</sup>

In his book *Karl Marx*, Allen Wood suggests that Marx’s thought on alienation undergoes a shift between his earlier and later work. Namely, Wood suggests that in Marx’s earlier work, alienation is an “explanatory concept,” and that in the later writings it functions only as a “descriptive concept.” Wood writes:

We should look on alienation in Marx’s mature thought not as an explanatory concept but as a descriptive or diagnostic one [and] view it as describing the condition of a person who lacks a sense of self-worth or of meaning in life, or else preserves such a sense only by being the victim of illusions or false consciousness.<sup>40</sup>

To be fair, Wood clarifies that this is only a “provisional” suggestion. But it is worth mentioning all the same that Marx in no way psychologizes alienation in the way that Wood suggests he does. Although alienation often does involve or lead to a sense of personal ennui, the concept of alienation in Marx’s later work is by no means simply a description of a psychological state. It instead describes the real position of the human being with relation to the forces of production in a capitalist society. This plays an explanatory role insofar as it is impossible to understand, in Marx’s theory, how the human being is diminished without deploying it.

Concerning alienation’s conceptual character, I am in agreement with Eugene Kamenka, who writes,

In the economic *magnum opus* of his mature period—*Das Kapital*—he does not rely on the term “alienation” at all. Was it, then, one of the casualties of his tendency toward economic reductionism? Had it been dropped as a “philosophic” or “ethical” concept having no place in his new objective and scientific historical materialism?

The answer is no. The positive content which Marx gave to the term “alienation” remains central to the position he is expounding in *Capital*. The mental process of objectifying one's own product and allowing it to dominate one Marx now calls the *fetishism* of commodities; it remains the same process. Man's loss of control over his labour power Marx calls his *dehumanisation*; it, too, is the same process—a process which for Marx remains of central importance to the understanding of capitalism. Man's loss of control over the product of his work Marx now calls *exploitation*; a term which does not mean that Marx thinks the capitalist is getting too much—more than is “reasonable,” but which underlines his insistence that what belongs to one man, or to men in general, is being appropriated by others, or by some men in particular. Exploitation is made possible by the creation of surplus value; but its basic ground for Marx remains the alienation of man from his labour power, the fact that man's activity becomes a commodity. In the *German Ideology* and in Marx's economic notes and drafts made between 1850 and 1859 the connexion of all this with the term “alienation” is made specific. But we do not need to have the connexion made specific, to have the actual term flourished in the text, to see precisely the same theme in *Wage Labour and Capital*, the *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital* itself.<sup>41</sup>

I do not think it is possible to seriously maintain that the concept of alienation undergoes any significant revisions at least from the time it appears in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and through the rest of Marx's works following the *Manuscripts*. And I certainly do not think it is correct to maintain that Marx abandons the concept altogether. Consider the following passage from *Capital*:

On the one hand, the process of production incessantly converts material wealth into capital, into means of creating more wealth and means of enjoyment for the capitalist. On the other hand, the labourer, on quitting the process, is what he was on entering it, a source of wealth, but devoid of all means of making that wealth his own. Since, before entering on the process,



his own labour has already been alienated from himself by the sale of his labour-power, has been appropriated by the capitalist and incorporated with capital, it must, during the process, be realised in a product that does not belong to him. Since the process of production is also the process by which the capitalist consumes labour-power, the product of the labourer is incessantly converted, not only into commodities, but into capital, into value that sucks up the value-creating power, into means of subsistence that buy the person of the labourer, into means of production that command the producers. *The labourer therefore constantly produces material, objective wealth, but in the form of capital, of an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist as constantly produces labour-power, but in the form of a subjective source of wealth, separated from the objects in and by which it can alone be realised; in short he produces the labourer, but as a wage labourer.* This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the labourer, is the sine qua non of capitalist production.<sup>42</sup>

This is remarkably close in content to passages about alienation that already appear in the 1844 “Estranged Labour” manuscript. What remains for today’s readers is to understand more specifically how the phenomenon of alienation also relates to the inversion of bourgeois ideals and their conversion into their opposites, as when Marx writes in the *Grundrisse* that the worker

sells himself as an effect. He is absorbed into the body of capital as a cause, as activity. Thus the exchange turns into its opposite, and the laws of private property—liberty, equality, property—property in one’s own labour, and free disposition over it—turn into the worker’s propertylessness, and the dispossession [*Entäusserung*] of his labour, [i.e.] the fact that he relates to it as alien property and vice versa.<sup>43</sup>

Here, it is instructive to note Richard Gilman-Opalsky’s remarks on the significance of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, in his 2020 book *The Communism of Love*. There, Gilman-Opalsky correctly observes,

*Grundrisse* can only be understood as a sustained inquiry into the ways that capital and money disfigure and destroy healthy human community. Marx’s overarching concern in *Grundrisse* is to understand the necessary devaluation, dehumanization, and alienation of the human being in capitalist society. The humanism of *Grundrisse* is scarcely obscure, and any

reading that misses the central importance of this is a misreading. Those who categorically reject the basic premises of Marxist-humanism do not do so only by selectively reading the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* but also by failing to read *Grundrisse* well or even at all.<sup>44</sup>

To understand more fully the meaning of Marx's *Grundrisse*, in Chapters 7 and 8, we will explore Marx's critiques of the limitations and hypocrisy of bourgeois morality. We will see how the process of alienation under capitalism lays a material foundation for the ideologies that reflect a world in which the ideals of liberal morality are expressed, in practice, as their opposites. But first, in Chapter 5, we will explore the relationship between freedom and determinism in Marx's thought. Much will hang on the character of the interrelation between the two, for one classic objection to the notion of a Marxist ethics is that Marx might be committed to a fatalistic determinism that rules out freedom and, ipso facto, morality. But this is not the case, as we will see.

## 5

## Radical Chains (Marx on Freedom and Determinism)

If Marx's and Engels's materialist conception of history entails that human behavior is strictly deterministic and that socialism is guaranteed by the inexorable march of history, then it would seem to follow that human beings are not and could not be "free" in the way that the practice of moral judgment generally presupposes them to be. When we deem a person to be morally responsible—that is, to be the appropriate object of moral praise or blame—we generally presume that they have, in some deep sense, *chosen* to act as they did. We presuppose that they are the author of the event in question.

Strict determinism has it that actions which might seem at first blush to be "mine" in some deep sense were in fact fatalistically preordained by circumstances preceding even my very existence. "My" decisions would for that reason then be quite out of my control and not properly attributable to *me*, after all. A Marxist moral theory owes to its hearers an explanation of how it is that historical materialism is not strict determinism of this kind, a further explanation of what kind of determinism historical materialism *does* entail, and an account of how this can be compatible with the human emancipation Marx repeatedly identifies as the chief aim of socialist praxis.

If Marx's economic determinism requires that individual human beings always only behave just as the "laws of history" unavoidably compel them to, then moral praise and blame is no more appropriately applied to them than it is to inanimate objects dropped from heights. Numerous interpreters of Marx, presuming that historical materialism does entail a strict, mechanistic determinism, have gone on to reason that Marx's theory is therefore inhospitable to morality. However, historical materialism does not entail this.

We might here be appropriately reminded of Marx's oft-quoted observation that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>1</sup> What

is meant by that famous line from Marx's 1852 *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*? For one thing, it expresses that human social existence is the product of human labor, and as such, it is susceptible to human intervention aimed at making it over and (re-)directing its course. I argue this principle is absolutely central to Marx's moral thought. Any given individual human being, while alienated from their human powers, has relatively little in the way of genuine authorship over their actions or even their entire lives, but not exactly none. By contrast, at the level of the species, it can be said that humanity truly is the author of its actions, and of the course of its own history. This is true even if only unconsciously so, and in an attenuated fashion prior to the realization of full human emancipation in fully developed communism.

Both Marx and Engels insist on multiple occasions that humanity itself is a human product.<sup>2</sup> However, "humanity" is an abstraction. To satisfy ourselves with the explanation that "humanity" is free in the desired sense (even while individual human beings are not) would be to content ourselves with a resolution of the antagonism between freedom and determinism that occurs only in the realm of thought. Yet our aim is not merely to discover a clever solution to a philosophical puzzle. It is rather to ascertain how this kind of self-making can be manifested by individual human beings, so that a given individual might more truly be said to be the author of her actions.

As such, the discussion of freedom and determinism in Marx is highly interwoven with our understanding of Marx's concept of the individual. For purposes of clarity and presentation, I treat these subjects in two separate chapters. (Chapter 6, "Individuality," directly follows the present one.) Here, I will set the stage for understanding the reconciliation of freedom and determinism in Marxist thought, but it will be more fully transparent once we've considered Marx's view of individuality. An explanation of the relationship between freedom and determinism in Marx's thought, and that of the relationship between individual and society, outline in parallel the same historical process through which human emancipation becomes realized.

In order to help orient our discussion, it is useful to say a bit about how Marx's proffered resolution to the antagonism between freedom and determinism relates to the positions that many readers will recognize as familiar from traditional Anglophone philosophy. "Incompatibilism" is the name given to views that hold freedom to be untenable in the presence of determinism. "Compatibilist" views maintain that this pair can coexist. If we were to map Marx's positions onto Anglophone/analytical-philosophical

perspectives on the matter, then Marx is a compatibilist about freedom and determinism.

However, such a mapping must remain purely heuristic. If taken too literally, it will obscure what Marx takes to be two of the most important distinctions between historical materialism and the worldviews he associates with ideologically “bourgeois” approaches. Namely, one must not overlook the deep extent to which on a Marxist approach to thinking through freedom, agency, morality, and necessity, the precise relationship between freedom and determinism can be given no static or permanent description.

This antagonism is one that shifts dynamically over the course of human history, with each side of the contradiction conditioning and transforming the development of the other. There is no fixed and final answer to the question of how human freedom can exist in the presence of deterministic laws. This relationship is not a puzzle to be contemplated in thought, but a problem to be worked out concretely in the course of history. What’s more, the impetus for this development is provided by human action, itself both free and determined.

Here, I use the term “dialectical compatibilism” to invoke both the ways in which Marx’s approach to freedom and determinism is in conversation with traditional analyses of this pairing, and also the ways in which it is fundamentally divergent from them.<sup>3</sup> This position moves beyond the views typically arrayed along the axes of determinist or libertarian, compatibilist or incompatibilist. Much of the confusion surrounding Marx’s positions on the relationship between freedom and determinism stems from the fact that for Marx this is an evolving and historically contingent relationship. One cannot issue timeless, universal statements about the degree to which external determining factors influence human behavior, or concerning the extent to which this behavior is the free and voluntary action of human beings.

It is true that humans have acted under conditions that, speaking for the most part, they have not chosen. Yet in so doing, they also bring those conditions increasingly under their conscious control. As humans develop greater control over their circumstances, they correspondingly broaden their capacity for free, self-directed agency. In this way, on Marx’s account, freedom and determinism conflict with one another much as they do on the most well-known “incompatibilist” accounts. Yet deterministic economic forces also function as preconditions for human freedom and figure into the story of how that freedom comes about. Marx’s picture is not of a compatibility between freedom and determinism that holds true in precisely the same

way for all humans across time and space, but rather of a human freedom that grows, spurred in part by the operation of deterministic laws. In human activity, freedom and determinism are mutually conditioned in ways that produce their ever-greater dialectical compatibility, unfolding across time.

Karl Popper, whose influence in the Anglophone reception of Marx has been unfortunately large, writes that Marx adhered “to the false belief that a rigidly scientific method must be based on a rigid determinism.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it has become something like conventional wisdom that Marx subscribed to a crude economic determinism that would make human freedom unintelligible. This view of Marx usually rules out, or at least declares incoherent and unintelligible, any genuinely moral content in his work. Hence, one work in micro-economics could claim that Marx’s “economic determinism had consequences for the picture of human beings in Marxist theory, and for the freedom of action of economically acting individuals. They have no autonomy of action, they only carry out economic laws.”<sup>5</sup> And Jules Townshend in his 1996 book *The Politics of Marxism: The Critical Debates*, could write,

a potential conflict arose between Marx’s economic determinism and his idea of human agency, which allowed individuals, and particularly classes, a certain autonomy of action, through ‘practical-critical’ activity. Marx’s idea that communism was inevitable permitted him to avoid the question of whether it was morally desirable. . . . Yet what if the determinist theory, upon which this ‘inevitability’ rested, was flawed? Would this not then put the moral appeal of socialism centre stage?<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein, Eugene Kamenka, in *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, argued that Marx did not see the proletariat as an active force in society, and instead

stuck to his negative view of the proletariat as the *most suffering class* . . . Marx chose to rely on “history,” to hold out to the proletariat the vision of a classless society *made safe* for goods, where enterprise and freedom would be *guaranteed* by the economic foundations of society itself, where freedom would not lie in struggle, but follow from mere existence.

Kamenka writes that this conception had a “servile character,” and that in following Marx, “Marxists were upholding a servile and unfree morality.”<sup>7</sup>

It is, as we will find, an oversimplification to understand Marx's comments about the role of economic laws in shaping the prospects for and likelihood of communism as though they simply participate in a balancing act between the twin poles of deterministic inevitability and abstract moralistic voluntarism. It is a still more grave vulgarization to suggest that it collapses entirely into the mechanistic determinism Marx explicitly rejected.

Willis H. Truitt, in his 2005 book *Marxist Ethics: A Short Exposition*, wittily remarks on the critical reception of Marx's historical materialism: "It is odd that the issue of determinism in Marx should be brought up at this late stage of the development of Marxist thought. One might even suspect that all these years of academic anti-Marxist indoctrination which teaches that historical materialism is a deterministic system has worked."<sup>8</sup>

A final note before we proceed: although I speak here of "freedom," I do not argue that Marx defended the existence of "free will." In fact, he did not, and his references to free will are nearly always ironic. By "free will," Marx understood the self-determining, spontaneous, autonomous, cause of human actions that figures in the moral theory of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. But Marx writes of Kant:

Neither he, nor the German middle class, whose whitewashing spokesman he was, noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeoisie had as their basis material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production. Kant, therefore, separated this theoretical expression from the interests which it expressed; he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into pure self-determinations of "free will," of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological conceptual determinations and moral postulates.<sup>9</sup>

In *Capital*, Marx describes the worker as "the man who is compelled to sell himself of his own free will"; here, too, his words drip with irony.<sup>10</sup> Freedom in Marxist theory has little to do with the kind of spontaneity that requires we posit the will as an ideal/spiritual substance, wholly undetermined by material causes. It has much more in common with what Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, calls "concrete freedom." Hegel writes,

*concrete freedom* requires that personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full *development* and gain *recognition of their*

*right* for itself . . . and also that they should, on the one hand, *pass over* of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and on the other, knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own *substantial spirit*, and *actively pursue it* as their *ultimate end*.<sup>11</sup>

It would be a facile error simply to translate Hegel's terms into "materialist" concepts, in order to arrive at a Marxist concept of freedom. However, it is nonetheless illuminating to note here how little this kind of freedom has to do with the undetermined free will. This view of freedom is best expressed as a proliferation and mastery of one's own powers, a kind of individual flourishing that is made fully possible only in and through one's unalienated relationship to the species. Marx alludes to this in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, where he writes,

Just as through the movement of private property, of its wealth as well as its poverty—of its material and spiritual wealth and poverty—the budding society finds at hand all the material for this development, so established society produces man in this entire richness of his being—produces the rich man profoundly endowed with all the senses—as its enduring reality. We see how subjectivity and objectivity, spirituality and materiality, activity and suffering, lose their antithetical character, and thus their existence as such antitheses only within the framework of society; we see how the resolution of the theoretical antitheses is only possible in a practical way, by virtue of the practical energy of man. Their resolution is therefore by no means merely a problem of understanding, but a real problem of life, which philosophy could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as merely a theoretical one.<sup>12</sup>

I give the name "dialectical compatibilism" to that view. Human beings are compelled to act so as to satisfy their needs within circumstances that they cannot fully control. But in so doing, they are determined—by biological need and by external circumstances—to respond to their need and their circumstances in ways that, in turn, expand their capacities to intervene into the world around them and direct its processes. They gain greater freedom precisely as a result of the deterministic forces to which they are subjected.<sup>13</sup> Human freedom is itself a human product, one that emerges gradually over the course of history out of human beings' goal-directed interactions with their natural and social environment. There is no inconsistency in Marx



describing fairly law-like, deterministic regularities of human behavior on the one hand and speaking of a flourishing of human freedom, individuality, and creative potential on the other. If determinism is the negation of real human agency, then human freedom is the negation of that negation, one that can emerge only in the course of history.

In the following sections of this chapter, I trace Marx's treatment of the relationship between freedom and determinism. I consider how his approach to theorizing that relationship developed over the course of his life, with special attention paid to his doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus, the *Communist Manifesto*, and *Capital*.

### Marx on “the Difference Between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature”

Marx's doctoral dissertation is also an early treatment by Marx of the relationship between freedom and necessity, and an examination of the ontological status of abstract objects. Here, Marx studies the differences between the atomistic physical theories of the ancient Greek materialist philosophers, Democritus and Epicurus. Marx defends Epicurus against the charge leveled against him by Cicero, Leibniz, and others, that he is little more than a poor plagiarist of Democritus, arguing that not only does Epicurus make unique philosophical contributions of his own, but that his physical theory represents a theoretical advance beyond Democritean atomism. This advance consists partly in Epicurean physics' avoidance of the strict mechanistic determinism that is a hallmark of Democritus's view. On that basis, Marx credits Epicurus with formulating a materialist worldview that can accommodate freedom.

To understand the relationship between Marx's study of ancient Greek atomistics and his views on the relationship between freedom and determinism, it will be first necessary to introduce the physical systems of Democritus and Epicurus in a bit of detail.

Democritus argued that the fundamental physical structure of matter is composed of atoms—small, indivisible particles—that move in straight lines. The motion of atoms in Democritean physics is determined entirely by external forces on them. They move, impelled by the downward pull of gravity or by the force of collisions between atoms. Epicurus adopted the framework of Democritean atomism, with the following notable alteration: atoms did not simply move in a straight line, the path of which was strictly determined

by external forces acting on the atom. Rather, atoms sometimes, but not always, “swerved” slightly from their original paths. This motion was determined not by the action of external forces, but by the atoms’ own intrinsic natures.

As Walter Englert demonstrates persuasively in *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, Epicurus developed his doctrine of the swerve as a response to a challenge from Aristotle. How could one explain the motion of animals—a self-movement that resisted explanation in terms of strict mechanistic determinism—using atomistic theory? This challenge left Epicurus with two choices:

either to assert that living creatures only apparently had this power, and that all their motions could be explained in terms of the weight and collisions of atoms from which they are made, or to find a new motion in the atoms that could account for the property in animals.<sup>14</sup>

Epicurus chose the latter course. With the addition of the swerve to his atomistic physics, Epicurus posited a type of atomic motion that allowed for atoms to move in ways not determined purely by their weight and collisions. The apparently nondeterministic and voluntary motion of animals could then be explained in virtue of this property of the atoms that comprised them.

This “swerve” distinguishes Epicurus’s physics from Democritus’s. Since the motion of atoms is not completely determined by external forces, Epicurus’s physics describes a world that is not strictly mechanistically deterministic and in which atoms as individual entities are not simply subject to external necessity. For Marx, this is a crucial and fruitful departure from Democritus. Marx sees the swerve as a natural physical explanation for the possibility of individuals to intervene into the material world beyond themselves, through activity determined by their own unique qualities. This allows for the “existence” of an atom to be in harmony with its “essence.” This harmony of existence with essence constitutes the real expression of the atom, the reconciliation of the conflict between freedom and necessity. As Marx writes:

The contradiction between existence and essence, between matter and form, which is inherent in the concept of the atom, emerges in the individual atom itself once it is endowed with qualities. Through the quality the atom is alienated from its concept, but at the same time is perfected in its

construction. It is from repulsion and the ensuing conglomerations of the qualified atoms that the world of appearance now emerges.<sup>15</sup>

The swerve allowed the atom to differentiate and distinguish itself in terms of its relationship to other atoms. But atoms as purely abstract objects are incapable of realizing themselves in matter in this way. Only concretely individual atoms with specific qualities can repel other atoms, thereby differentiating themselves and coming to exist in correspondence with their essences. As George McCarthy writes in his very lucid and detailed treatment of Marx on Epicurus:

For the atom to exist and be real, it must have certain spatial qualities such as size, shape, and weight and thus take on a determinate existence. However, as a determinate being with material existence, the atom must take on qualities or properties that contradict its essence as pure immediacy and abstract individuality (alienation). It is this contradiction between material existence and essence (Concept) that lies at the heart of Epicurus's philosophy and his view of Greek society. Marx saw in Epicurus the first philosopher to incorporate the notion of the contradiction between essence and reality into his thought.<sup>16</sup>

Abstract unqualified objects cannot exist because they cannot affect matter, and cannot thereby bring about the expression of their essences. It is for this reason that Marx says "abstract individuality is freedom from being, not freedom in being."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Marx argued, reasoning based on contemplation of such abstract objects will necessarily lapse into methodological idealism. Centering abstractions means eschewing material determinations as *mere* appearances that distract from a proper appreciation of the nature of reality, rather than being the absolute starting place for a proper understanding of it.

The Epicurean swerve was attacked by a number of ancient commentators on the basis that Epicurus provided inadequate philosophical justification for belief in such a property of atoms. Cicero notably complained that Epicurus's doctrine of the swerve was "rather to beg the question than to discuss it."

He argued that Epicurus's theory of the swerve had established

A fortuitous concourse of atoms to help us out of our difficulty. [...] But you have not yet discovered that primitive power in nature from which your

atoms derive their motion. [. . .] You have not yet revealed to us any extrinsic cause which impresses each atom with that impulse which gives it its proper direction.<sup>18</sup>

Marx argues that this demand for a cause of the swerve is beside the point, since for it to be caused in the way that Cicero demands would be for it to be brought back into the domain of a mechanistic determinism. Marx writes, "To inquire after the cause that makes the atom a principle—a clearly meaningless inquiry to anyone for whom the atom is the cause of everything, hence without cause itself."<sup>19</sup>

Marx's defense of the Epicurean swerve is that on Epicurus's atomistic physics, the atom itself is the active principle in nature. Therefore, the movement of Epicurus's atom is very far from requiring an explanation in terms of the forces exerted upon it by the rest of the natural world. Instead the Epicurean atom itself determines that world. Marx admires in Epicurus's thought its lack of reliance, in contrast to Aristotle's "unmoved mover," upon an external source of motion in order to explain the existence and appearance of the natural world.

While for our purposes it has been necessary to present a general explanation of the doctrines in Epicurus that Marx chose to treat in his first extended philosophical work, what is crucial to notice in the doctoral dissertation is not so much this or that vagary of Epicurus's physics, and Marx's reaction to each bit of it, but rather Marx's overarching interest in defending what he recognizes as a brand of materialism that can accommodate freedom, conscious activity, and intervention into the material world. As James O'Rourke writes in his 1974 book *The Problem of Freedom in Marxist Thought*, "although Marx himself does not endorse the Epicurean position *en bloc*, it is clear from the text that he is in genuine sympathy with its leading principles, especially those which seem to be compatible with the Hegelian philosophy of spirit." This gives us some *prima facie* reason for skepticism that Marx himself endorsed a mechanistic determinism that would have far more in common with Democritus, whose physics he already rejects at this early stage in his philosophical development, than it does with Epicurus.

However, Marx is also critical of the role that atoms as abstract individuals continue to play in Epicurus's physics. As George McCarthy writes in *Marx and the Ancients*:

The radical individualism of Epicurus was necessary to undermine positivism and religion, but was not adequate to develop a real social anthropology or theory of society based on friendship, citizenship, and public participation. For this, a turn to Feuerbach's notion of species being and Aristotle's view of democracy and citizenship would become necessary.

It would be Marx's immediate task in his early writings to move from one level to the other, to move from abstract self-consciousness and freedom to concrete self-consciousness in the political economy. In order to overcome the contradictions of existence and essence—materialism and ethics—implicit in Epicurean physics, the alienation of the objective and physical world must be overcome through social praxis. The theoretical praxis and ethical critique of the philosopher must be transformed into effective action on the world and a change-over of the institutions of political economy. The *Dissertation* sets the path, the direction, and the priorities for Marx's earliest and later studies on the social relations of production. Just as the *Dissertation* begins with a critique of the foreign externality of nature, *Capital* begins with a critique of the "natural laws" of political economy. It is this relation between self-consciousness and nature in all its material forms—from physics to political economy—that is at the heart and soul of Marx's lifework.<sup>20</sup>

But before we get to our discussion of *Capital*, let us note that if there were a single text to which one might look for support in reading Marx as a strict determinist, it would likely be the *Communist Manifesto*. It is Marx's great rallying cry, in which he famously exhorts workers to revolution with assurances that they've "a world to win" and "only their chains to lose." However, on closer inspection we find that even in the *Manifesto*, Marx sees history trending in a direction that produces the increasingly greater possibility of communism—but not its inevitability.

In the *Manifesto*, Marx writes that "What the bourgeoisie . . . produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."<sup>21</sup> This claim locates both the strength and the Achilles's heel of the bourgeoisie in one and the same historical force: the working class. Capitalists accumulate wealth by extracting surplus value from the human beings who are compelled to sell their ability to labor. At the same time that this relationship enriches and empowers the capitalist class, it also sows the seeds of what may become its eventual destruction. Marx makes this point in

his criticism of feudal opposition to the bourgeoisie, writing, "What they upbraid the bourgeoisie with is not so much that it creates a proletariat as that it creates a revolutionary proletariat."<sup>22</sup>

Marx's claim that the bourgeoisie's fall and the proletariat's victory are "equally inevitable" ought to be understood in this context. They are "equally inevitable" because their sources are the same. Because the conditions of the bourgeoisie are mirrored in those of the working class, each is precisely as likely as the other. This is not to say that the proletariat's victory is inevitable, full stop, but rather to stress that the emergence and development of the proletariat, a necessary condition of the capitalist mode of production, is inextricably linked to the capitalist enterprise itself.

Marx speaks, especially in *Capital*, of the capitalist as "capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will."<sup>23</sup> A capitalist is a person who acts in a manner that is to a great extent determined by economic laws that guide the movement of the capital she possesses. Marx also speaks, in *Capital* and elsewhere, of the actions of the proletariat understood in terms of what it is as a class and what, by virtue of that nature, it will be compelled to do.

As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, numerous authors have taken this strand in Marx's thought to imply a crude economic determinism. Marx is (mis)characterized as professing human actions to be one-sidedly determined by economic laws that operate beyond their control. But what Marx describes when he addresses the way in which economic laws play a role in determining the actions of human beings, are tendencies of members of various social groups to act in circumstances shaped through those laws. These are not iron-clad predictions for particular individuals. Howard Sherman, in his 1981 paper "Marx and Determinism," puts this point very well:

Marx pointed out that one can find regularities of human behavior, that on the average we do behave in certain predictable ways. This behavior also changes in systematic ways, with predictable trends, in association with changes in our technological and social environments. At a simpler level, the regularities of human behavior are obvious in the fairly constant annual numbers of suicides and divorces (although these also show systematic trends). If humans did not, generally, behave in fairly predictable ways, not only social scientists but also insurance companies would have gone out of business long ago. Any particular individual may make any particular choice, but if we know the social composition of a group, we can predict,

in general, what it will do. Thus, on the average, most large owners of stock will vote in favor of preferential tax rates for capital gains; most farmers will favor laws that they believe to be in the interest of farmers.<sup>24</sup>

As a rule, a capitalist will tend to maximize his profit irrespective of the social repercussions. A bourgeois intellectual will tend to develop theoretical justifications for the continuation of capitalism, often in spite of the glaring social contradictions. Within a bourgeois standpoint, and even while continuing to support the bourgeoisie as the class most suited to lead humanity economically, politically, and socially, it is possible for certain members of this class to develop a keen understanding of the social contradictions produced by class society. In some cases, bourgeois ideologists develop real commitments to such noble and crucial aims as human development or the eradication of ills such as global poverty and ecological destruction. Marx recognizes this phenomenon as a feature of the subjective consciousness of individual bourgeois theorists. For instance, in *Capital*, Marx notes that the capitalist “Robert Owen, soon after 1810, not only maintained the necessity of a limitation of the working-day in theory, but actually introduced the 10 hours’ day into his factory at New Lanark,” even though “this was laughed at as a communistic Utopia.”<sup>25</sup>

Marx goes on to credit Owen with developing an approach to education that could serve as an early model for education in a communist society:

From the Factory system budded, as Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future, an education that will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings.

According to Marx, the progressive aspects of Owen’s thought were, in the end, limited by his failure to recognize the proletariat as the class best suited to lead humanity out of the contradictions produced by class society. For Marx, a bourgeois class position and standpoint tend to delimit the range of actions and opinions we are likely to see even from a reformer such as Owen. However, it would be wrong to ignore that within that position and perspective there remains a wide array of open choices for individual actors and they may formulate valuable insights and opinions, and that these views

might strive to faithfully reflect reality and even to progressively transform it, pointing beyond that bourgeois perspective.

Another example of this can be found in the work of nineteenth-century French novelist and playwright Honoré de Balzac. Balzac of course had not bourgeois, but actually royalist sympathies, and was opposed to the bourgeoisie at a time when it played a historically progressive role. Yet he was one of Marx's favorite authors, an artist whom Marx describes in *Capital* as "generally remarkable for his profound grasp of reality."<sup>26</sup>

In an 1888 letter, Engels further elucidates the genius of Balzac's realism. Engels writes the letter in response to a request that he review a novel written by a socialist author. He concludes that the novel is not very good, criticizing it particularly for being unrealistic in its depiction of the working class as a passive mass. Engels goes on to illustrate his point with a discussion of the realism to be found in Balzac's work, a realism that is achieved in spite of the latter's royalist sympathies:

Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the inevitable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply—the nobles. And the only men of whom he always speaks with undisguised admiration, are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloître Saint-Méry, the men, who at that time (1830–6) were indeed the representatives of the popular masses. That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found—that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac.<sup>27</sup>

A figure such as Robert Owen demonstrates some of the most progressive viewpoints possible within a bourgeois perspective. More typically, there are persons such as John D. Rockefeller or John F. Kennedy, who simply seek mostly to rationally advance the interests of their class. (I am speaking of a narrowly instrumental "rationality" in these cases.) Additionally, there are individuals such as Joseph McCarthy who actively promote the most brazenly reactionary tendencies of their class.



In the face of this evident diversity in ruling class thought, Marx would argue that across this range of bourgeois actors, their identifications with that class inhibit them, from fully recognizing the progressive role of the proletariat and its fitness to lead society. So long as they maintain their bourgeois identification, they are unlikely to fully embrace the historical materialist perspective developed in Marx's thought. However, within that bourgeois perspective and bourgeois class identification, a wide range of thought and action is possible. The charge of crude economic determinism does not fully allow for this, as Marx does.

Furthermore, not only is a wide range of thought and action possible within a bourgeois class identification, but it is possible for individuals to choose to renounce that identification entirely. Already in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx explains that confronted by the immense contradictions of capitalist society, an increasing number of individual members of the bourgeoisie (and of the petty bourgeoisie) may switch their class allegiance entirely to the camp of the proletariat. These virtuous turncoats come to the view that it is only the victory of the working class, leading a movement toward communism, that can safeguard the continued existence and development of humanity. Of course, one need look no further than Marx's collaborator, Engels, for an example of a bourgeois who chose this course. However, it would be deeply misguided to develop a theory of, and a program for, social and economic development that relied heavily on such occasional changes of camp. In a society based on profit, it is the profit motive, by and large, that dominates in the decision-making of capitalists, just as it is the conscious or unconscious struggle against the inhuman aspects of labor under capitalism that dominates in the decision-making of workers.

Marx argues that economic relations determine human action to a significant extent, but this by no means licenses interpreters to dub him a strict economic determinist who sees no room for freedom of human action. Marx is able to describe and account for a wide range of human action, even as he sees that action being constrained by economic factors. Marx's theory, as a theory of the emancipation of the human species through the self-emancipation of the working class, depends precisely on the struggle of human beings to realize themselves as free and conscious human actors, and further, to be more than "appendages to machines" or mere subjects of economic and social relations that dominate them instead of being directed by them.

In *Capital*, Marx discusses the economic trends that prepare the way for a fully human existence, but critics who accuse Marx of seeing communism

as a matter of deterministic historical inevitability fail to appreciate that he also discusses how capitalism inhibits human progress. Left unchecked, capitalism would render progress ultimately impossible. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx writes:

Capital that has such good reasons for denying the sufferings of the legions of workers that surround it, is in practice moved as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. In every stockjobbing swindle every one knows that some time or other the crash must come, but every one hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbour, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in safety. *Après moi le déluge!* [After me, the flood] is the watchword of every capitalist and of every capitalist nation. Hence Capital is reckless of the health or length of life of the labourer, unless under compulsion from society. To the out-cry as to the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of overwork, it answers: Ought these to trouble us since they increase our profits? But looking at things as a whole, all this does not, indeed, depend on the good or ill will of the individual capitalist. Free competition brings out the inherent laws of capitalist production, in the shape of external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist.<sup>28</sup>

Several important themes are expressed in this passage. First, far from leading inexorably toward a communist future, capital—and of course, the capitalist class, taken as a whole—looks impassively at the “coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race.” This prospect is treated as though it were merely some regrettable but ultimately unalterable natural certainty. (Relating this to the contemporary situation, we can consider the baleful shoulder-shrugging that typifies the attitudes of many of today’s world governments toward impending and already unfolding catastrophes such as global climate change.)

It is only under “compulsion from society” that humanity can be taken off of its collision course with the destructive effects of capitalism. The conscious and active intervention of the masses into politics and into world history is ultimately all that stands between us and this “final depopulation.” We can see that Marx agreed with this from his own political engagement with the workers’ movement, not to mention his lifelong dedication to investigating how the social and economic gains of capitalism can be preserved and

subsumed in a higher stage of social development, and his conviction that just this ought to be done and could only be done by the active masses. Marx prioritized the majority of society acting in the interest of the majority of society.

Second, we see mentioned in this passage the way in which the “free competition” of capitalist society reveals itself to be unfreedom in practice, taking on the “shape of external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist.” One important question to be asked of those who see here some ground to label Marx a crude economic determinist and therefore an amoralist, is whether they can really doubt that capitalists generally act in ways designed to preserve and multiply their capital. “Looking at things as a whole,” the capitalist, no matter how noble he might be in his heart of hearts, whether his will be “good or ill,” must extract as much labor as possible, at as little cost to himself as possible. This remains true if he wishes to compete in the marketplace and to remain a capitalist, at all. It is this general tendency of people in capitalist society to defend their economic interests that makes it possible to predict that class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whose interests are in conflict with one another, will take place. However, it does not by any means guarantee which side will win out in that inevitable conflict.

It is true that there are numerous occasions on which Marx expresses his conviction that human beings would achieve a communist society. I happen to think this view was reasonable, based on the historical vantage point available to Marx at the time. However, as Sherman writes in his 1981 paper “Marx and Determinism”:

Human beings are free to make (or not make) a revolution, but our actions are predictable by a knowledge of present and previous conditions, including our psychologies, and the laws or regularities of human behavior under these conditions. “To say that the revolution is inevitable is simply (in Marx’s scheme) to say that it will occur. And it will occur . . . not in spite of any choices we might make, but because of choices we will make.”<sup>29</sup> The prediction of socialist revolution, however, must be expressed as a probability rather than a certainty because of our limited knowledge of the conditions and the laws.

Under capitalism, the range of actions available to people are narrowed. And within that narrow range, people are most likely, “as a whole,” to take the

actions that defend their economic interests. Here we might cite again Marx's observation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>30</sup> It is not possible to have a correct understanding of capitalist society without understanding the extent to which many factors, including economic laws, do delimit the range of actions available to people under capitalism, and do make some actions more likely to be taken than some other ones.

Though it is certain that under capitalism, workers will struggle against their conditions, it is by no means simply necessary or historically determined that their struggles will be victorious, or that communism will be achieved. It is not necessary that workers will recognize their class interests, will gain a theoretical understanding of the nature of capitalism, will organize themselves politically in such a way as to effectively promote their interests, or will recognize human development and "rich individuality" as the highest aim for human beings. Even if they achieve all these things, I would like to emphasize that from our historical vantage point today, it is plain to see that that they may not do so before the spoliation of the Earth under the capitalist mode of production is too far gone. We may not avert a premature "final depopulation" of the human race. Whether any of these things do take place, and in a timely way, depends in great part upon the actions of what Marx refers to as the most conscious elements of society setting a political direction and theoretical context for the struggles that emerge. And when they do so, they do so not merely as patients subject to inexorable economic laws, but as historical agents who through their activity, assist their fellows in realizing their historical agency as well. Marx recognizes that there is a space for free and conscious intervention even under capitalism. But he also recognizes that this scope is limited. One of the goals of a communist movement, then, is to intervene consciously into human history in the ways that are currently possible. While constrained by capitalism, the communist movement works to expand the sphere of free action and push necessity back to its furthest possible limit.

None of this is to negate the extent to which economic processes in class society, which are the result of human actions but which have developed spontaneously, without conscious human planning or direction, have led to a historical moment that points toward communism, and provides the material basis for communism. This is how alienated labor can function, over

the course of history, to make its own abolition more possible, and create the conditions for human emancipation. For instance, as Marx points out, the forces of production are increasingly socialized even if the *relations* of production are not. It is for this reason that Marx could write in *The German Ideology* that “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise.”<sup>31</sup>

The whole development of human history is a movement toward a point at which the stakes for humanity become increasingly clear: “given and transmitted from the past,” they boil down to a stark choice. This is the choice either to build a movement that preserves and develops the positive contributions of class society as the historical and material basis on which to create a society that satisfies human needs, or to allow the destructive aspects of capitalism to simply play themselves out, stamping out of existence countless achievements of human culture. Think here, for instance, of fascism and its historical appearance where capitalism has fallen into decay and the workers’ movement has not been able to seize power. In this instance matters would be still more dire: unchecked climate change would quite likely bring about a hastened extinction as a result of ecological crisis.

Because of how capitalism has revolutionized production, it is possible for human beings to devote a vanishingly small amount of time to satisfying their biological needs. They can devote the majority of their lives instead to the intellectual, cultural, and artistic pursuits that enrich the social existence of humanity. These pursuits develop humanity’s existence well beyond the merely biological. To use Marx’s terminology, it is possible for human beings to free themselves in great part from the narrow requirements of “natural necessity.” The capitalist mode of production is especially contradictory in this respect. Through the drive of capitalists to revolutionize the forces of production in order to relentlessly increase efficiency and profits, it has become possible to produce enough to satisfy a wide and expanding array of human needs, and with a minimum of human labor devoted to the satisfaction of subsistence needs. Under class society, however, the economic basis of society places great limits on that human development. As Marx writes in the first book of *Capital*:

All methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; 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 life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. . . . It establishes an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.<sup>32</sup>

At the heart of capitalist production lies a contradiction between the immense wealth produced by this economic system and the immense privation and subjection also produced by it. This passage above puts forward the moral critique of capitalism which Marx levels against capitalism throughout his work. Capitalism produces all manner of human degradation, reducing the human being to the mere “appendage of a machine” and grinding down their intellectual and fully human potential. But at the same time that capitalism degrades the human being, it is also capitalism that produces the material basis for the “rich individuality” which forms the basis of Marx’s moral outlook.

Marx’s moral outlook and his approach to understanding human individuality are based in the historical materialist method that he first outlined in *The German Ideology*, but already employed well before that. The *Grundrisse* opens with the line, “To begin with, the subject to be discussed is *material production*.”<sup>33</sup> How humans produce in the natural world in order to satisfy their needs is the basis for any scientific understanding of human beings. Marx goes on to write that socially determined production of individuals is the starting point for inquiry. Marx’s conception of the individual, which plays a significant role throughout his work, takes on a more robust and concrete character in his later writings. This begins especially with the *Grundrisse*, as a result of the fact that here Marx brings the results of anthropology to bear

more directly and to a greater extent than in his early work. Indeed, at the end of his life, Marx became interested in the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, and intended to write a treatment of Morgan's writings. Marx died before he could complete that project, a work Engels later adopted and published as *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. This gives us an indication of how Marx attempted to base his understanding of the individual on the results of science throughout his career. Marx's aim was to theorize concrete individuality based on the lived experiences of existing human beings, an improvement over the abstract, one-sided individual who, he charged, forms the subject of eighteenth-century philosophy (this is a theme to be taken up more fully in the following chapter, in which I discuss the concept of individuality in Marx's thought).

In the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx describes his method of historical materialism:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurgos* of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. . . . The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

In its mystified form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.<sup>34</sup>

The critics who charge Marx with economic determinism attack him, by and large, for failing to conjure up in thought what does not already exist in reality—a world of human beings who act entirely freely, and a human society that allows ways of living undetermined by narrow economic pressures and interests. Marx does not offer that illusion or otherwise indulge the ideological demand for it.

What is necessary and inevitable is the impermanence of the existing state of things, but not what will replace it, assuming that human society actually does continue to exist and develop in the long term. Of course, it might not. But already to suggest that capitalism cannot go on forever is itself “critical and revolutionary,” as Marx points out. It holds out the possibility that the existing state of things might be cast away in favor of something new, and for human intervention into the “fluid movement” of history. It is the certainty of such movement that allows Marx to conceive of a further development of the human individual.

Such a development can only occur upon an economic basis that has not yet been developed, just as the full freedom of the human person can only exist in a society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” a society that has not yet been produced. In reading Marx as a crude economic determinist who cannot account for human freedom, his critics reveal only a very shallow engagement with the complexity of Marxist thought. Even while Marx refuses to attribute a range of freedom to human beings that does not yet exist in capitalist society, he sees how that sphere of freedom can be expanded upon a new economic base. A new and more robust freedom can be brought about through the activity of conscious human actors, leveraging existing social processes to achieve their goal.



## 6

# Individuality

No concept figures more centrally into Marx's ethical thought than that of "individuality." Individuality is at stake both in his blistering condemnations of bourgeois egoism and in his positive vision of a world of freed human beings pursuing their individual and social self-realization in a society designed to promote it. The relevant methodological disagreements with classical liberal political theory turn largely on the question of what it means to premise political theory on the basis of human individuals' needs and natures. Marx's own theory of human individuality exemplifies his historical materialism, which understands the natural and social world as produced by (and susceptible to) human intervention in that world. The claim that human individuals are the products of human social activity and intervention into history anchors Marx's historical materialist critique of capitalism, his criticism of liberal political theory, his revolutionary program, and his vision of a better world.

Marx's preoccupation with individuality might appear curious, in certain quarters.<sup>1</sup> A kind of gray, nondescript collectivism has come over the years to be associated with Marxism in much of the popular imagination (although with the rise of left protest movements, antifascist struggle, and support for democratic socialism in recent years, this is rapidly changing). And indeed, his promotion of individuality as a value bears practically no resemblance to capitalism's atomizing, consumerist exaltation of the "individual." To clarify this distinction, it is helpful to turn to Marx's concept of a "social individual." The social individual is a being in whose person the antagonism between society and individual is reconciled. In capitalist ideology, the notion of "individuality" is invoked in order to reify and essentialize the separateness and mutual antagonism among persons. It represents shrinking away into the private sphere as a high expression of individuality and freedom. For Marx, conversely, individuality is the result of that practical social interdependency which continually produces novel avenues for self-expression and self-realization.

The tension between Marxist and capitalist conceptions of individuality is highlighted by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*. In the following quote, he addresses an imagined bourgeois interlocutor's accusation that the Communists aim to do away with individuality:

From the moment when labour can no longer be converted into capital, money, or rent, into a social power capable of being monopolised, i.e., from the moment when individual property can no longer be transformed into bourgeois property, into capital, from that moment, you say, individuality vanishes. You must, therefore, confess that by "individual" you mean no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle-class owner of property. This person must, indeed, be swept out of the way, and made impossible.<sup>2</sup>

By no means does Marx intend for individuality as such to also be swept away. For it is not stultifying, degrading, enslaving capitalism that instantiates the conditions best suited to the full flourishing of the individual human person. Yet capitalist ideology advertises individual self-realization as precisely one of its most notable achievements. It does this through presuming and naturalizing an opposition between individual and society, so that social cooperation is regarded with some suspicion as inimical to individual human expression, or at the very least, always ultimately in tension with it. As capitalism guards against democratic control of society's resources, it preserves the conditions under which capitalists arise and persist. Capitalists express their individual human agency through their domination of resources and people. Capitalism as a system thus prevents the individual flourishing of the majority of human beings, while affording even to the economic elite only a highly impoverished form of individuality predicated on the absence of mutual and authentic human social connections. Frustration of individuality, in Marx's sense of that term, is inevitably required by capitalist conditions.

Marx's conception of individuality represents a significant point of departure from the abstract, atomized individual of liberal theory. Instead of attempting to isolate actors from context, Marx proceeds from an understanding of human beings as concrete "social individuals" and looks to the results of natural and social science to form the basis of his theorizing about how human beings ought to live. Replacing the liberal picture of human beings as competitive individuals who produce society in order to satisfy their egoistic wants, Marx presents human beings as essentially social.

Human beings are able to individuate themselves, to devote time and resources to needs that are not the strictly biological needs of a mammal in the species *Homo sapiens*, and to develop capacities beyond those narrowly suited to satisfying biological needs. But this is only possible through the labor process. Moving beyond subsistence needs is a point in human history when social production has begun to reach a degree of complexity and sophistication such as to support such individuation. This process no doubt originates quite early in human history. Nonetheless, the fact of human individuality is not a timeless truth about human nature, but rather a historically emergent phenomenon produced by essentially social beings through the labor process.

In the writings collected into his 1857 *Grundrisse*, Marx reflects upon the abstract individualism of classical liberalism, writing that it is “stupid” for a conception of human beings to take “the isolated man as its starting-point.” Marx continues:

Man becomes individualised only through the process of history. Originally he is a species being, a tribal being, a herd animal—though by no means as a *zoon politikon* in the political sense. Exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation. It makes herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it.<sup>3</sup>

It is not possible to have a fully accurate understanding of human individuality without also understanding the essence of human beings as productive beings. Humans produce their needs and transform their natures through social labor. Therefore, not only are the concepts of individuality, essential human nature, and labor interrelated, but their interrelation suggests the method that is best suited to successful inquiry into each of them. That approach is described by Marx and Engels in their *Critique of the German Ideology* as the “materialist conception of history.” Historical materialism takes human production and the circumstances in which it takes place to be fundamental in conditioning human existence. The character of human social relations is produced and determined through their interactions with nature and with one another through the labor process. Labor is best understood as a process in which human beings interact with nature both as part of it and as distinct from it. In this light, it is possible to see how human existence becomes increasingly sophisticated. From this view, the history of human development is also the history of the emergence and development of

distinct human personalities and what Marx later terms, “rich individuality,” in *Capital*.

The capitalist mode of production in particular has contributed greatly to making it possible for there to be a greater proliferation of human powers and forms of being than existed in feudal society, or in any other previous societies. One of the most significant ways in which it does this is through the process of globalization. From a Marxist perspective, globalization is a result of capitalism's character as a system that must constantly seek out new markets for the commodities it produces, as well as new sources of raw materials and fresh labor.

As Marx writes, the capitalist system must “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> This expansionist aspect of capitalism plays two roles that are each important here for our discussion of the development of human individuality. First, capitalism as an economic system tends to spread to more and more parts of the globe, fundamentally transforming societies wherever it goes. Second, capitalism brings people from disparate parts of the globe into contact with and interdependence upon one another. There is precious little production carried out today that uses resources or labor that only exist within the borders of one nation. In order to do so much as cook a dinner, we purchase spices from one country, vegetables from another, cookware from a third. We then sit down to eat at a table made in a fourth, while wearing clothing made in a fifth. Marx writes, “In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.”<sup>5</sup> He continues,

as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

These “wants” build and strengthen the connections among disparate parts of the globe and make a world culture possible. They lay down the basis for the sort of global cooperation which would be necessary to build communism as an economic system. More directly relevant for our purposes here, they achieve historical breaks. For instance, they take the provincial person of feudal society and transform her into the cosmopolitan of bourgeois society. These shifting contexts and progressions make a new wealth

and diversity of human experiences and activities into live options for the individual person.

Marx observes that the creation of the material basis for such an individuality already exists as an ongoing and developing process in human history. Rich individuality can only be realized by means of advances in society. This form of individuality is constituted by the full development and proliferation of human capacities and entails the production of the human as an all-sided being rather than as a limited and degraded being. It depends upon increased efficiency and complexity in social production and the social existence of human beings. The history of human social development is intimately and necessarily connected with the history of the emergence and further development of human individuality. In fact, they are two moments of the same historical process. In positing the development of rich individuality as the highest aim for human beings, Marx does not simply conjure up a moral command out of whole cloth. Rather, he argues that human beings must work consciously to promote a process that is already developing in human history, but whose continued development depends entirely upon whether or not human beings will build a society with such human development as its guiding principle.

An understanding of human beings as concrete, specific, and potentially “rich” and fully social individuals is superior to classical liberal political philosophy’s theorization of the human person as an isolated, and competitive, atomized individual. It better captures the reality of what it is to be a human being and is more consonant with the results of anthropology which reveal individuality to be a product of social labor. Rather than a reliable constant, this research has shown individuality to be a historically emergent phenomenon. This conception of concrete human individuality has greater explanatory power in analyzing how societies and individual human beings grow and develop. It is able to make sense of individuality not as a timeless and ahistorical fact, but rather as a result of human activity: initially as an unintended consequence of social production and then, with the transition to socialist relations of production, consciously promoted as the highest aim of social production.

What Marx describes in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* as “rich individuality” functions as a standard for the ethical evaluation of people, actions, and circumstances. “Rich individuals” are persons liberated from *object* dependency on other people and yet fully, consciously, and enthusiastically interdependent with them. The promise of communism’s capacity to

promote rich individuality, and the reality of capitalism's manifest incapacity to do the same, are two key premises in the case for socialism. The notion of "rich individuality" in *Capital* represents the development of a thread in Marx's thought that extends at least as far back as his doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus. Attending to Marx's use of the individuality concept allows us insight into how his body of work constitutes a coherent whole, and into how this concept coheres with those of human nature, alienation, and freedom in Marx's writing.

We have already explored how Marx's doctoral dissertation sheds light on the development of his thought on the dialectic of freedom and determinism. Marx's study of the atom also figures importantly in his philosophical development, more broadly. This commentary on atomism in ancient Greek philosophy has not attracted attention from very many of his interpreters. Yet as Peter Fenves observes in his treatment of Marx's doctoral thesis, "the dissertation foreshadows Marx's later work most of all in its many orientations, objectives, and methods of research."<sup>6</sup>

We can draw out a connection between the dialectic of freedom and determinism, and the nature of human individuality. This holds especially as pertains to individuals' capacities for self-directed action. In Kant, for example, freedom is closely linked to autonomy: my actions are free when they are caused just by me, and not by that which is alien to me and beyond my control. In those circumstances, a philosophical account of freedom hangs crucially upon the possibility of accurately describing the boundaries of my selfhood, of individuating me from the world of which I am a part, in hopes that with such knowledge in hand, one might correctly ascertain whether a particular action originated with me.

The relevance of Marx's early study of Greek atomistics to his conception of human individuality is also more exactly stated by a passage in *The Holy Family*. There, Marx criticizes liberalism's presupposition that the role of the modern state is to "hold together the individual self-seeking atoms." He argues, against this picture, that not only is this not the state's role (for human beings are already bound together by their organically interdependent social relations), but that human beings are not to be analogized to atoms at all. In this way, questions of political philosophy (what is the proper role of the state in mediating human relations?), social philosophy (how ought human beings to relate to one another?), and philosophical anthropology (what is it to be an individual human being, after all?), are linked with metaphysics

in the question of to what extent human individuality can be accurately described as analogous with the singleness and independence of the atom.

In *The Holy Family*, Marx writes:

Speaking exactly and in the prosaic sense, the members of civil society are not *atoms*. The *specific property* of the atom is that it has no properties and is therefore not connected with beings outside it by any relationship determined by its own *natural necessity*. The atom *has no needs*, it is *self-sufficient*; the world outside it is an absolute *vacuum*, i.e., it is contentless, senseless, meaningless, just because the atom has *all fullness* in itself. The egoistic individual in civil society may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself into an *atom*, i.e., into an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless, *absolutely full*, blessed being. Unblessed *sensuous reality* does not bother about his imagination, each of his senses compels him to believe in the existence of the world and of individuals outside him, and even his *profane* stomach reminds him every day that the world *outside* him is not *empty*, but is what really *fills*. Every activity and property of his being, every one of his vital urges, becomes a *need*, a *necessity*, which his *self-seeking* transforms into seeking for other things and human beings outside him. . . . It is therefore not the *state* that holds the *atoms* of civil society together, but the fact that they are *atoms* only in *imagination*, in the *heaven* of their fancy, but in *reality* beings tremendously different from atoms, in other words, not *divine egoists*, but *egoistic human beings*.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to deny the radicalism of classical liberal theory vis-à-vis the monarchist ideologies it opposed and supplanted; it would of course be mistaken to overlook that in the case of, for example, a figure such as John Locke. For Locke, the point is not for individuals to remain in their isolation but rather to form society with one another. In explaining why it might be that there exists no historical record of a “state of nature,” Locke reasons that

it is not at all to be wondered, that history gives us but a very little account of men, that lived together in the state of nature. The inconveniences of that condition, and the love and want of society, no sooner brought any number of them together, but they presently united and incorporated, if they designed to continue together.<sup>8</sup>

However, this Lockean explanation of the impetus to civil society incorporates two errors of liberalism. It presupposes a natural separateness and disunity of human beings, and it justifies political subjection and hierarchy as necessitated by natural antagonisms among human individuals. Marx references atomistics in his critique of political liberalism precisely because classical liberal political philosophy relies so heavily on the conception of the human being as an isolated being, who needs little from other human beings and from society besides perhaps some guarantee that it will be left alone to pursue its own happiness. Human beings are individuals, yes, but real, concrete individuals with needs that impel them constantly to seek out other human individuals and maintain relationships with them, and to make use of the natural world they metabolize as what Marx calls their “inorganic body.” For individual human persons to flourish, develop, and maintain a continued existence, they must make their needs effective in the world outside themselves, and realize themselves in and through their connections with the outside world. It is in this way that an individual person’s “self-seeking” can be transformed “into seeking for other things and human beings outside him.”

Marx further clarifies his conception of individuality in *The German Ideology*. There, he writes,

[under capitalism] the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals; the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals. Thus, on the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals themselves no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, and hence of the individuals only insofar as they are owners of private property. . . . On the other hand, standing against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, who are, however, by this very fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals*. . . . Things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence.<sup>9</sup>



At this point in his career, Marx shied away from invoking the alienation concept by name. However, as we discussed earlier in Chapter 4, the concept is perfectly recognizable in his description of human individuals at odds with one another, and even with their own productive capacities. A concern with human emancipation and the flourishing of individual human beings continues to form the basis of Marx's normative condemnation of bourgeois society and his arguments for the creation of a new society based on the satisfaction of human needs, throughout his work. Marx writes in the *Manifesto* that in bourgeois society, "capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, in communist society, accumulated labor is "a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer."<sup>11</sup> To promote the "existence" of the worker and, more broadly, of the human being, is to make it possible for this person to interact with the world outside of herself through a wide and expanding array of activities. Under communism, production will be carried out toward the end of promoting this increased development of human beings' capacities and satisfaction of their needs.

In the posthumously published *Grundrisse*, Marx terms this his "dialectic method." He contrasts his own focus on the socially determined production of human individuals in the natural world, with the work of economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. These political economists, he charges, rely on a conception of human nature given to them by eighteenth-century philosophers who take the individual in the society of "free competition," the person who appears to be freed from any natural or social bonds, as the basis of their theorizing. Instead of understanding this type of person as a particular historical development, they instead understand the essence of this type of person as the essence of human nature itself and project it backward into the past, mistaking a social phenomenon at a particular historical moment for a natural and stable feature of mankind.

But according to Marx, this method of abstracting away from a contemporary appearance and mistaking it for a stable essence obscures a pertinent point concerning individuality. If we examine the anthropological record and attempt to understand what human beings have been over the course of their existence, we do not end up with a picture of human beings as essentially the atomized, isolated, competitive individuals of bourgeois society. Instead, "The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole."<sup>12</sup>

Marx argues that to suppose that it is possible for human beings to have produced as “isolated beings apart from society” is as much of an absurdity as the development of speech without individuals living and speaking together. Production, he says, is always the production of “social individuals,” and all production is the appropriation of nature by the individual within a particular form of society. To come back to his words in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*:

The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole. At first, he is still in a quite natural manner part of the family, and of the family expanded into the tribe; later he is part of a community, of one of the different forms of community which arise from the conflict and the merging of tribes. It is not until the 18th century, in “bourgeois society,” that the various forms of the social nexus confront the individual as merely a means towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a *zoon politikon* in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society. Production by an isolated individual outside society—something rare, which might occur when a civilised person already dynamically in possession of the social forces is accidentally cast into the wilderness—is just as preposterous as the development of language without individuals who live together and speak to one another.<sup>13</sup>

Later in the *Grundrisse*, Marx reiterates these ideas when he argues that “human beings become individuals only through the process of history,” and that “exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation.”<sup>14</sup> It is only in and through society that the human being becomes individualized, and so the existence of the human being as an individualized animal is one that is historically arisen and socially produced. As opposed to the picture of the human being as an essentially atomized or essentially individual being, “The human being is . . . an animal that can only individuate itself in society.”

Individuation, Marx argues, is a process that takes place only within society and only at a certain stage of social and economic development. Marx himself does not flesh out this claim in great detail, but it is possible to reconstruct the story nonetheless. For human beings to appear as individuals,

and not merely as biological specimens of a certain type, requires that productive forces be developed so that she does not need to spend her entire waking life satisfying her merely biological needs for food, water, shelter and the like. Such a level of development in the forces of production is too great and complicated a task to be carried out by a single person. It is an inherently social project in that it requires a number of people working together, communicating with one another, and developing increasingly complex ways of organizing and dividing their labor. Sociality is hence *prior* to any individuation that takes place in human beings. That process of individuation is also a mark of how far human social development has progressed. The more efficiently a society satisfies biological human needs, and the more productive it is, creating new resources to satisfy the historically emergent needs that arise in an increasingly complex society, the more that its members are able to pursue activities determined more by their own expanding array of interests and less by mere biological necessity. In a phrase, we begin to see an emergence of the “rich individuality” that Marx regards as the highest aim for human beings.

It is the case that human beings appear more social the further in the past we look, but it is also true that if we take a clear look at human beings living today, we find that it also makes little sense to think of existing society as a mere aggregate of isolated individuals. Thus, Marx argues that “society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another.”<sup>15</sup> Marx sometimes uses the phrase, “social individuals”; this is very apt to describing the types of actors we find in society and captures the dual aspects of human nature as inherently social and potentially “richly” individual.

In the capitalist mode of production, capitalists’ profit is based on driving down the amount of labor necessary to satisfy the basic reproductive needs of their workers, as far as possible. Capitalism has massively reduced, through the division of labor and the industrialization, mechanization, and rationalization of production, the labor necessary to satisfy human needs. This would potentially free up the majority of human beings’ hours for the pursuit of tasks not narrowly subordinated to the reproduction of the species.

Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, capitalist production provides

the material elements for the development of the rich individuality, which is as varied and comprehensive in its production as it is in its consumption, and whose labour therefore no longer appears as labour but as the full

development of activity itself, in which natural necessity has disappeared in its immediate form; because natural need has been replaced by historically produced need.<sup>16</sup>

Capitalism, in its drive to increase profits and productivity, revolutionizes and advances the capacity of society to satisfy a wide and expanding range of human needs. It thereby makes it possible for there to be a transition to a society in which rich individuality would be the “ruling principle” of the society and recognized as the highest good for human beings. As Marx says of the capitalist in the first volume of *Capital*:

Fanatically bent on making value expand itself, he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production's sake; he thus forces the development of the productive powers of society, and creates those material conditions, which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.<sup>17</sup>

The obvious question that may be asked here is whether human flourishing—the development of “rich individuality”—really is the highest aim for human beings, and whether this understanding of human flourishing really can play the role of an ethical ideal in any moral theory worth the name. A further question is whether building a movement for communism really is the best way to realize this aim. I will treat the three questions separately, although they are closely related.

I will begin by restating the first question, which might be put: What is so good, anyway, about satisfying human needs and developing human capacities? Why should that be the basis of our moral theory? Why not maximizing happiness? Or instantiating the virtues? Or following divine commands, for that matter?

Though some will find this answer unsatisfying: we should care about the full flourishing of human beings because *they're us*. For Marx, the question “Why promote human flourishing?” doesn't arise unless a person already has a thoroughly alienated and un-human perspective on her own species and on the world. For such a figure, knowing that some path of action is most likely to preserve the continued existence of human beings and to further their full development in the natural world does not suffice. They regard it as still an open question whether that path ought to be taken. This would be

similar to the mistake made by the person who wants to know the answer to the theological question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” to whom Marx replies:

Since for the socialist man the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his birth through himself, of his genesis. Since the real existence of man and nature has become evident in practice, through sense experience, because man has thus become evident for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man, the question about an alien being, about a being above nature and man—a question which implies the admission of the unreality of nature and of man—has become impossible in practice.<sup>18</sup>

This line of thought can be applied to the question of whether or not “man is the highest being for man,” as Marx says, which expresses the same idea as the statement that the development of rich individuality is the highest moral aim. For Marx, it is incoherent to talk about value in a way that does not posit human beings and their productive activity as the source and ontological basis of all value.

Elsewhere, I have referred to this as Marx’s “radical irreligion,” which I argued

is best understood not primarily as an ontological stance on the existence or non-existence of God, but rather as part and parcel of a philosophical worldview radically committed to sweeping such questions aside, to ontologically and epistemologically centering the human perspective, to overthrowing “all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being,” and to taking as its core principle that “man is the highest being for man.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Interests, Individuals, and Egoists: Marx on Max Stirner**

Although they are not typically regarded as such, the writings collected as Marx’s and Engels’s *Critique of the German Ideology* constitute a rich and detailed engagement with moral philosophy, and an important expression of Marx’s moral outlook.<sup>20</sup> After all, roughly two-thirds of the hefty volume is

devoted to a merciless critique of Max Stirner's 1845 defense of ethical egoism, *The Ego and Its Own*<sup>21</sup> (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*).<sup>22</sup> Harkening back to some of the major themes we addressed in Chapter 4 on the alienation concept, here I discuss Marx's disagreements with Stirner on the question of how to solve the problem of alienation, a question that figures importantly into Marx's moral thought. In countering Stirner's radically individualist, egoist, and nihilist proffered solutions to alienation, Marx expresses key aspects of his own ethical outlook.

Marx's polemic against ethical egoism has been largely ignored, partly due to the fact that the entire set of those manuscripts which we now know as *The German Ideology* were not published until 1933, nearly ninety years after their completion. Moreover, the collection of writings runs roughly seven hundred pages, and in its abridged form, the form in which it is most commonly read (especially by English-language readers), the four hundred pages of polemic against Stirner are excised. The polemic itself is challenging for even the most careful reader who has not also read Stirner's book, which was required reading among intellectuals in 1845 Berlin, but is far less well-known today. These factors have contributed to Marx's attack on Stirner being overlooked and deemed inessential at best, a condition which is little changed since Paul Thomas rightly pointed out in his 1975 paper "Karl Marx and Max Stirner," that *The German Ideology*

has rarely been read in its entirety; the long section Marx devoted to a phrase-by-phrase dissection of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, in particular, has been almost completely ignored. . . . The task remains both to credit Marx's critique of Stirner with the importance it deserves, and to consider this critique in its context.<sup>23</sup>

In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner rejects all morality on the basis that it demands the sacrifice of the individual for a good that is not his own. Of course, communism is included in this category of theories that posit a "good cause" for which the individual must sacrifice himself.<sup>24</sup> Stirner discovers that every "good cause," which has been thought to be a good in itself, is actually an egoistic cause, seeking its own good. (For Stirner, causes are quite capable of engaging in their own self-directed activity, not to mention, of duping human beings into servitude.)

In Stirner's view, the human pursuit of a "good cause" is always little more than a new brand of sacrifice and self-denial. Therefore, since every cause is

itself an “egoistic cause,” individuals should take the place of their own “good causes” and pursue only their own narrowest self-interest. Stirner writes:

What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost the good cause, then God’s cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of mind and a thousand other causes. Only *my* cause is never to be my concern. . . . My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* [*das Meinige*], and it is not a general one, but is—*unique* [*einzig*], as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!<sup>25</sup>

Stirner’s writings might have been dismissed at the time of their publication had they not been quite so effective against their principal target: the ethical humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach famously argued in *The Essence of Christianity* that “God” was merely an abstraction and personification of man’s qualities. “The Divine Being,” he wrote, “is nothing other than the being of man himself, or rather, the being of man abstracted from the limits of the individual man or the real, corporeal man, and objectified, i.e., contemplated and worshiped as another being, as a being distinguished from his own.”<sup>26</sup> The oppressive, alienating nature of religion would be overcome once God was replaced by “Man” as a divinity for himself, and once human beings shed their pious attitude toward the abstraction, God, and took up a new one toward the abstraction, Man, recognizing that what had previously been regarded as a superhuman being was in fact only an objectification and deification of human qualities. Through the adoption of this new correct idea, “what is regarded as atheism today,” namely, the denial of the existence of God, “will be religion tomorrow,” a religion of Man.<sup>27</sup> But here, Thomas’s 1975 paper is very clear in explaining the seriousness of the challenge Stirner posed to this view:

The weakness in Feuerbach’s argument that Stirner seizes upon is rooted in Feuerbach’s conception of man’s divinity, not as something man had to build or to create, but as something to be regained at the level of consciousness. Once it is regained, man must by implication give way before his new-found divinity. Stirner maintained that “divinity” will be as oppressive and burdensome a taskmaster as any other spirit or collectivity to which individuals, historically, have succumbed. . . . Feuerbach’s celebrated

reversal of subject and predicate—his substitution of man for God as the agent of divinity—changes nothing; mankind as a collectivity is just as oppressive and sacred as God, because the real individual continues to be related to it in a religious manner.<sup>28</sup>

Feuerbach's humanism was developed to solve the problem of alienation, but in fact it only seemed to reproduce the problem, this time with the abstraction "Man" raised to the level of a divinity. Stirner argued that Feuerbach's humanism simply replaced a religious fear of God, and a Christian ethic of self-renunciation, with a religious sacrifice of the individual for the good of abstract "Man." Stirner rejected the problem of alienation, and also any quest for personal development or self-improvement, on the grounds that these cause individuals to adopt a religious, self-denying attitude to their possible, unalienated, better selves. Even to suggest that individuals should develop their own talents and capacities is to suggest that they sacrifice themselves in the interest of an alien "good cause."

Marx (as did many of the Young Hegelians) recognized the importance of Stirner's book as a critique of Feuerbach's ethical humanism.<sup>29</sup> A mere change in thought would not resolve the problem of alienation or do away with the self-renunciation of the individual which was characteristic of religious practice. However, Stirner himself made the same mistakes he accused Feuerbach of, lapsing into idealism and attributing to "causes" powers over human beings which they simply could not have (as though it were really the "causes," the "fixed ideas," that had led human beings astray, and not the real relations between human beings that had given rise to these ideas in the first place). Accordingly, Stirner's proposed solution to the problem was one that could be carried out entirely in the realm of thought: individuals had simply to choose to pursue their own narrow self-interest as an egoistic cause. "In the final analysis," Marx writes, Stirner

arrives merely at an impotent moral injunction that everybody should himself obtain satisfaction and carry out punishment. He believes Don Quixote's assurance that by a mere moral injunction he can without more ado convert the material forces arising from the division of labour into personal forces.<sup>30</sup>

Marx's critique of Stirner's ethical egoism displays a philosophical continuity with his explication of the distinction between abstract and concrete



individuality in his doctoral dissertation; the statement, “abstract individualism is freedom from being, not freedom in being” might be just as at home here as it is in that earlier work. For Stirner, the problem of alienation can simply be swept away through a further retreat of the private individual into herself as her only cause or concern, which she opposes to social concerns. Mutual dependencies and interrelations among human beings are regarded as illusory, at best, and dangerously deceptive, at worst. Not only does Stirner’s brand of ethical egoism call on the individual to embrace asocial behavior and attitudes, but it argues that the individual should satisfy herself at her present level of development, whatever that may be, rather than strive to further that development. It posits the human person as a static, isolated atom, rather than as a concrete individual, developing and existing within society, for whom the problem of alienation can only be resolved through a transformation of society, brought about through coordinated human action aimed at common goals.

The connection between individual and society in Marx’s thought is further clarified in Marx’s defense of communism against Stirner’s charge that communism calls for the subordination of individuals to the “good cause” of society. Stirner argues that for communists, “Society, from which we have everything, is a new master, a new spook, a new ‘supreme being,’” for whom the individual must sacrifice himself.<sup>31</sup> Marx answers that far from denigrating the individual, the development of a communist society, and the practical activity required to achieve that society, are the only methods by which the well-being of individuals can actually be pursued, a goal which Stirner’s “mere moral injunctions” cannot achieve. Stirner is mistaken in believing

that the communists want to “make sacrifices” for “society,” when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Stirner, on the other hand, offers no genuine solution to the real challenges that concrete individuals face. He argues against any organized political (much less, revolutionary) activity on the grounds that such coordinated, planned action would subordinate the individual to the needs of a collective. (Stirner does imagine that individuals might spontaneously form a “Union

of Egoists” whose purpose is to restrict any social incursion into their egoistic pursuits, but provides no explanation as to how such a union might be achieved.)

Paul Blackledge writes, in his 2012 book *Marx and Ethics*:

Against Stirner's claim that socialists had embraced a static model of human essence, which provided them with a moral basis for criticising existing society, Marx outlined a Hegelian historicised transformation of his earlier Feuerbachian materialism. In the modern world this process underpinned the emergence both of egoistic and more social forms of individualism. Morality, as it was understood by Stirner, was an essential authoritarian characteristic only of communities made up of the former. By assuming the universality of egoism, Stirner was unable to comprehend the concept of workers' solidarity. Conversely, because Marx recognized that solidarity had become a real need and desire for workers he concluded that it was unnecessary to impose the idea of community on them.<sup>33</sup>

Marx points to the workers' movement developing at the time of his writing, as a means by which the social conditions that limit the ability of individuals to flourish and pursue their own development as an end might be abolished. Stirner turns his back on this existing political current and retreats into the realm of ideas, thereby depriving himself of any genuine explanation of how the problem of alienation might be solved.

Characteristically of his and the Analytical Marxists' tendency to downplay, ignore, or outright revile the role of dialectics and historicity in Marx's thought, in his 2014 book *The Free Development of Each*, Allen Wood appreciates some key aspects of Marx's reply to Stirner but not several of those that are most crucial to articulating a correct understanding of Marx's approach to ethics. Wood writes:

Marx accepted Stirner's idea that all interests, ideals, and principles that claim universal authority are to be rejected as ideology in a sense equated with “the dominion of thoughts” and are therefore false impositions on human freedom. This false universality is now interpreted by Marx and Engels as an expression of a society divided into warring classes; it is the way class interests try to impose themselves on us as having some sort of transcendent or sacred authority.<sup>34</sup>

Crucially, however, the universal authority of the working class, as “the class with the future in its hands,” as the class against whom “no particular wrong” is done but “wrong generally,” and as the sole class that can forge the key to humanity’s self-emancipation from its “radical chains,” is no “false imposition on human freedom” but rather the absolute ground of human freedom, which is a point Marx makes again and again (and again). Wood imposes a strict, mutually exclusive dichotomy between authority and freedom that is not Marx’s (it is not even liberalism’s, making it unclear why Wood reads Marx in this way). What Marx and Engels approvingly term, “despotic inroads on the rights of private property” and “the dictatorship of the proletariat” are no less authoritative for being, on their view, necessary for the historical emergence of realized human freedom and individuality. We can agree with Wood that the authority of the working class is not “transcendent or sacred,” but to suggest that its universality is false in “a society divided into warring classes” is to fundamentally misunderstand the normative dimensions of Marx’s project.

Charles Mills’s 1994 essay “Marxism, ‘Ideology,’ and Moral Objectivism” puts the matter quite correctly when he writes that “a sympathetic reading” circumvents any nihilist reading of Marx’s and Engels’s claim that “the communists do not preach morality at all”; not only does Mills’s interpretation evade the charge of nihilism, but it further clarifies why, still theorizing within the context of existing class society, Marx cannot be said to suggest that the working class has no universal principles to impose. Mills’s tone is ironic at points, but the overall thrust of the analysis here is quite helpful:

Their point is that the opposition of egoism and altruism is not immanent in the structure of things, but a product of class society. To “preach morality” in these circumstances (to moralize without understanding this material foundation) would be to tacitly endorse the permanence of this contradiction, when in fact it needs to be transcended by a new society in which (because of the communist cornucopia of goods) it will disappear. A purely moral critique, then (given their view of morality as tied to an idealist sociology), would be inadequate because it would fail to get to the root of things, the ‘material source’ rather than the “highflown ideological [read: idealistic] form,” and would only address the superstructural symptom.<sup>35</sup>

As we saw earlier in Chapter 2, on ideology, the proletariat presages the abolition of morality because its class interests are identical with the interests of humanity and the development of those conditions within which human individuality may flourish. However, while recognizing the glimmers that workers' struggles offer us of a potential communist future, it is crucial not to forget that our present world remains rife with social antagonism. The proletariat has not made its conditions of existence general *yet*; that remains its historical task.

### Defending Marx's Methodological Holism

I have so far approached the topic of individuality and individualism in Marxist theory primarily from the perspective of detailing Marx's understanding of what it is to be an individual human being, and his understanding of the relationship between the individual and society. Yet another important aspect of understanding individuality in Marxist theory has to do with methodology: How best to investigate and explain human social phenomena? Do we understand it by investigating the actions of group subjects such as economic classes or even, humanity itself, taken as a whole (methodological holism)? Or do we explain it as primarily the result of the aggregated actions of many discrete individual human actors (methodological individualism)?

What is at stake in the question of whether to understand Marx as primarily a methodological holist or a methodological individualist? Attributing methodological holism to Marx has the virtue of being more neatly fitted to his accounts of group agency. More specifically it fits his descriptions of the tasks, aims, and actions of the bourgeois and proletarian classes. There are also sections of Marx's writing that suggestively imply a strict holism: in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels famously describe human history as predominantly the history of struggle between contending classes.

Methodological holism also makes the best sense of Marx's claims that class- and even species-level explanations account for the historic development of human beings. This becomes obscured if one attempts to admit, as the actions and interests of groups, only phenomena that can be reduced to the discrete actions and interests of separate and individual human beings. Put differently, social wholes exhibit emergent features that are irreducible to even the most detailed description of the specific features of the individual human beings that comprise them. Those posited wholes will be

fundamentally impoverished and inadequate to the task of doing social philosophy, as would be any description of the social world that limits itself to only those social features that *are* fully reducible to the features and actions of individual human beings.

So what then, are the drawbacks of reading Marx as a methodological holist? For some commentators, the chief drawback seems to be that it is very hard to make Marx's methodological holism compatible with the more individualist presuppositions of much mainstream analytical philosophy. One of the most well-known attempts to reconcile Marxism with methodological individualism is "Rational Choice Marxism," itself a prominent variant of "Analytical" Marxism. This strand of Marxist interpretation emerged within Anglophone analytical philosophy in the 1980s. To motivate the need for such a reconciliation, Jon Elster writes in 1985:

It is quite extraordinary, in my view, how Marx could shift from near-nonsense to profound insight, often within the same work. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, we have on the one hand the most striking statements of methodological collectivism and dialectical deduction, and, on the other hand, equally striking analyses of the way in which micro-motives are aggregated into macro-behaviour, to use T. C. Schelling's phrase. It is my firm belief . . . that the central insights of Marx are so valuable that we would do him and us a disservice were we to accept *en bloc* the methodology in which they were embedded.<sup>36</sup>

In their treatment of the debates between "orthodox" Marxist methodological holism and analytical methodological individualism, Andrew Levine, Elliott Sober, and Erik Olin Wright summarize Analytical Marxism's attitude toward that holism:

Authors such as Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski and G. A. Cohen have argued that what is distinctive in Marxism is its substantive claims about the world, not its methodology, and that the methodological principles widely held to distinguish Marxism from its rivals are indefensible, if not incoherent.<sup>37</sup>

Levine et al. conclude that while the rational choice Marxists are correct to prescribe a focus on the "microfoundations" of social phenomena, this does not necessarily indicate methodological individualism. Levine

et al. argue, "It is one thing to call for the elaboration of microfoundations of macrotheory and another to specify the form such microfoundational analyses should take."<sup>38</sup>

In his 1987 paper "On Marx's Holism," Timothy Shiell argues that the approach to the holism/individualism debate that would be most compatible with Marx's views is a combination of metaphysical individualism and methodological holism. (Shiell does not purport to make any claims about what the historical Marx did in fact believe on this score, however.) Shiell takes what is at stake in the question of methodological holism in Marx to be this: "The question is not whether or not Marx actually made definitional reductions, but is, rather, whether or not anything Marx wrote implies or entails that the properties of social objects are wholly reducible definitionally to the properties and relations of individual persons and things."<sup>39</sup>

However, Shiell explicitly dismisses out-of-hand the possibility that in order to understand Marx's social ontology, we require a dialectical approach that incorporates aspects of both doctrines and resolves the contradiction between them. Shiell writes, "It might be natural to suppose that Marx would have rejected the individualist/holist dichotomy in favor of a third alternative elaborated along quite different lines due (perhaps) to his characteristically 'dialectical' way of thinking."<sup>40</sup> Shiell goes on to argue against this, that one should not assume that Marx was dialectical in every particular, and that one ought first to posit a more simple acceptance of "the two traditional alternatives," of either individualism or holism. This might serve as a general approach to understanding a philosophical figure. But it gets things backward with respect to Marx: surely, the default assumption ought precisely to be that his positions *are* dialectical. To presume that Marx understands the range of possible approaches to be exhausted by these two alternatives, misses the point that they both belong to a tradition that Marx makes clear it is his intention to upend.

Nonetheless, Shiell concludes with the following apt description of Marx's position:

Marx's insistence on radical change in political economy forms the basis of his critique of methodological individualism. Because it provides only the simple determinations, the thin abstractions, methodological individualism cannot provide the sense of radical change which emerges from the full conception of the whole. Indeed, it systematically obfuscates the need

for such change. It is only when the abstracted parts are reconstructed back into the whole and the relations between them understood that the need and likelihood for radical change emerges.<sup>41</sup>

The debate over whether Marx's explanatory methodology is best described as "holist" or "individualist" dovetails with some of the concerns addressed in the preceding chapter, namely, whether one loses out on the ability to theoretically accommodate individual agency and freedom when offering social explanations in terms of inevitable clashes among classes.

Here, as with our earlier discussion of freedom and determinism, identifying a "dialectical compatibilism" in Marx allows us to make sense of what might initially appear to be irreconcilably opposite approaches. The insistence on treating individuals and their individual behaviors as the terrain on which social explanation bottoms out invariably leads to an incapacity to theorize the dynamics that give rise to those individual behaviors.<sup>42</sup> They are rendered conceptually invisible.

Methodological individualism might make better sense of social reality if human beings were themselves far more fully free and realized as individuals than they are under capitalism. But in a stratified, class-based society, the separate actions of individual human beings combine and produce social forces that in turn react back upon the members of society, directing their behavior differentially according to their economic class in ways that methodological individualism necessarily obscures.

The debate about methodologically individualist renderings of Marxism (as in "Rational Choice" or "Analytical" Marxism) brings us around full circle to Marx's insistence on doing away with "abstract" individualism and centering instead the real, concrete, individual human beings. This is so because it is in a sense quite odd—and sadly indicative of the shallowness that characterizes much of analytical philosophy's engagement with Marx's ideas—to *oppose* a methodologically "individualist" method to Marx's own "materialist" method, of which he wrote,

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, hydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must

always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.<sup>43</sup>

It is only in certain philosophers' imaginations that human individuals can be understood separately from the material conditions with which they interact and that produce them as particular persons in particular times. To assume a more methodologically "holist" approach is not to ignore the central role of human individuals in producing their social reality, but rather to allow that among the things human beings produce are social processes and categories that in turn affect human lives in ways that are rendered invisible by a reductive individualism.

One of the tasks of communism is for human beings to place themselves in more rational and conscious control of the social dynamics they create, a process that would in turn allow greater direct and indirect control over who we are and what we do, both as a species and as particular individuals. But this hasn't happened yet, and rendering it prematurely in pure thought, as methodological individualism does, impedes us in producing such a circumstance in reality.<sup>44</sup>



## 7

## “Bourgeois” Freedom and Equal Right

The civilization and justice of bourgeois order comes out in its lurid light whenever

the slaves and drudges of that order rise against their masters.

Then this civilization and justice stand forth as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge.<sup>1</sup>

Normative condemnations of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality appear frequently throughout Marx’s writings, not merely as casual asides, but as expressions of a coherent moral philosophy. In Marx’s writings, the free and full development of the “rich individuality” of the human person figures as a standard against which to judge all social institutions and social relations. This is true not only of earlier writings such as *The Holy Family* and *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, but also of Marx’s later work.

In writings such as the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx also offers critical analyses of the concepts of “right,” “freedom,” and “equality” as they operate within classical liberal political theory. In unpacking Marx’s critiques of these concepts, it is helpful to keep a key principle of Marxist ideology critique in view: “Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.” The meaning of “right,” “freedom,” “equality,” and similar concepts in liberal theory therefore cannot be explicated by merely taking the pronouncements of liberal political theory at face value. They must rather be considered in light of the social, political, and historical context within which they emerge, and the (often hypocritical) theoretical and practical purposes to which they are put. In the preceding chapter, I presented Marx’s distinction between “abstract” or bourgeois individuality and “concrete” or “rich” individuality that requires the conditions of communism to emerge. A similar distinction may be drawn between “abstract” or liberal bourgeois concepts of “right,” “freedom,” and “equality” on the one hand, and socialist versions of these concepts on the other.

It is useful to remind ourselves of what is conveyed by the adjective, “bourgeois.” It is not some mere empty epithet or jibe. To say of a concept or of a theory that it is “bourgeois” is specifically to say that it emerges from, reflects, and reinforces the conditions that the capitalist class requires to maintain its position as the ruling class in society. The term is therefore not inherently pejorative, but simply descriptive. However, in recognizing the specifically bourgeois class character of certain concepts, we can discover that the value of realizing them is not to be taken for granted as obviously universally beneficial. (The freedom that capitalists require for profitable exchange, for example, also appears as the enslavement and domination of masses of people globally.)

Marx argues that bourgeois freedom, equality, and property only retain their validity within a specific form of activity under capitalism—commodity exchange, such as that which occurs with the sale and purchase of labor power. Abstracting away from the rest of social existence under capitalism, it is possible to believe that the worker is truly free insofar as she is able to make her will effective through contract; truly equal, because she receives in exchange for her labor power a wage of ostensibly equivalent value; and truly protected in her right to property, because she is able to dispose of her own labor power as she wills.

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx writes:

[The sphere] within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all.<sup>2</sup>

But as soon as we leave this realm of abstraction we see, for instance, that the worker is denied access to the means of production. It now becomes possible to notice that he is not truly free to dispose of his labor power as he wills, but compelled to sell it so that he might continue to live. As these illusions of bourgeois morality become ever less tenable, the more concretely we understand the real situation of the worker and the real economic relations of capitalist society. The “Benthamite” notion that out of mere selfishness and private interest, the general commonwealth can be safeguarded, becomes harder to believe, and the hypocrisy and contradictions of capitalist society become clearer to see.

One might on this basis conclude that bourgeois society fails to live up to the promise of its liberal ideals, and that the situation calls for a “pure,” unhypocritical realization of liberal “freedom” and the rest. This is a mistake, for their contradictory practical expression only reflects their contradictory theoretical content: they are not inadequately realized under the conditions of mature capitalism, but rather are fully expressed, their content laid bare. For this reason, the critical potential of liberal ideals as standards of evaluation against which to judge actually existing bourgeois liberal society is highly limited. We see Marx make this point in the *Grundrisse*, taking a dim view of the value of immanent critique in this context. Marx writes:

Exchange value, or more precisely, the money system, is indeed the system of freedom and equality, and what disturbs [Proudhon et al.] in the more recent development of the system are disturbances immanent to the system, i.e. the very realization of *equality and freedom*, which turn out to be inequality and unfreedom.<sup>3</sup>

Bourgeois freedom is the freedom of the atomistic, individual agent to buy or sell a commodity, and bourgeois equality is the formal equality of individuals who expect to receive remuneration equivalent to the value of the commodities they enter into exchange. The worker and the capitalist *already* confront one another as formally free and equal in just this manner.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this formal universal freedom and equality that forms the basis for the capitalist mode of production, which gives rise to the widespread de facto bondage of workers and the de facto social and economic inequality so characteristic of capitalist society.

Socialism cannot be conceived of as simply a realization of bourgeois ideals such as freedom, equality, and justice, because bourgeois freedom,

bourgeois equality, and bourgeois justice are already realized *in bourgeois society*. They “who wish to prove socialism to be the realisation of the ideas of *bourgeois* society enunciated by the French Revolution,” Marx writes, are therefore misguided.<sup>5</sup> Socialism cannot be justified purely as the real implementation of liberal principles. It requires rather that these be superseded.

In what follows, we will explore in greater detail first, Marx's remarks on liberal freedom, and then, his critique of liberal equal right. In the course of this discussion, we will address one influential argument for reading Marx as amoral: namely, that he does not seem at all concerned with justifying his prescriptions by appeal to a liberal conception of justice.

It is true, of course, that Marx wrote that the ruling ideas in a society are the ideas of its ruling class. But this in no way impugns the validity of insurrectionary ideas. If consciousness is conscious existence, then the existence of a revolutionary class produces its own attendant consciousness, every bit as valid as the ideas of the ruling class (and then some). It is this real revolutionary consciousness that Marx seeks to express in his theory and which he applies in the case for socialism. It should strike us as no surprise that just as capital and labor come into conflict, so will socialist and liberal ideals. And these conflicts appear even (or especially) with respect to such seemingly “pure” and essential matters as freedom and right. As Marx and Engels remind us in the *Manifesto*: “The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.”

## Freedom

To appreciate Marx's critique of liberal freedom, we must recall the lessons drawn from our earlier discussions of alienation and of the dialectic between freedom and determinism. Marx's analysis of liberal freedom will focus on its failure to capture the value of having and exercising those creative powers which allow one to participate actively in directing the forces that govern one's own conditions of existence. We also see here a specific application of how proletarian or socialist freedom must come into direct conflict with the guarantees of liberal freedom, as well as a more detailed presentation of how, in virtue of individuals' alienation from their creative powers, free capitalist competition gives rise to the practical unfreedom of human beings under capitalism. Our earlier discussion of alienation helps to shed light on Marx's

analysis of the contradictory inner content of liberal freedom. Moreover, Marx's critiques of freedom, drawn here mostly from later works such as *The Communist Manifesto*, the *Grundrisse*, and *Capital*, will improve our understanding of how the alienation concept continues to play a key role in Marx's analysis throughout his mature works.

Recall that we have described alienation as a condition in which one is separated from, and opposed by, what is properly one's own. On Marx's account, individual freedom under capitalism has precisely this character. It would not be quite right to say that the picture of capitalism as a system that allows for freedom is totally illusory. It reflects a real freedom and a real historical achievement. Nevertheless, this is not the real human freedom of individuals, but rather the free and unfettered movement of capital.

“In free competition,” Marx writes, “it is capital that is set free, not the individuals. As long as production based on capital is the necessary, hence the most appropriate, form for the development of society's productive power, the movement of individuals within the pure conditions of capital appears as their freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

What is Marx saying here? A chief accomplishment of bourgeois revolutions across Europe was a political transformation that created the conditions in which commodity exchange could occur, without the limitations that had been placed on it by feudal property relations. Capitalists were now free to dispose of their private property in the manner most fitting to its internal logic of accumulation and expansion. The significance of this is captured well in Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of shifting property relations around land. Hobsbawm writes:

Neither the political nor the economic revolution could neglect land . . . The great frozen ice-cap of the world's traditional agrarian systems and rural social relations lay above the fertile soil of economic growth. It had at all costs to be melted, so that that soil could be ploughed by the forces of profit-pursuing private enterprise. This implied three kinds of changes. In the first place land had to be turned into a commodity, possessed by private owners and freely purchasable and saleable by them. In the second place it had to pass into the ownership of a class of men willing to develop its productive resources for the market and impelled by reason, i.e. enlightened self-interest and profit. In the third place the great mass of the rural population had in some way to be transformed, at least in part, into freely mobile wage-workers for the growing non-agricultural sector of the economy.<sup>7</sup>

This setting-loose of commodities conferred upon human beings the freedom to order their behavior in ways that corresponded to the capitalist mode of production, that they might best advance their private economic interests within it. This is an important freedom as capitalist exchange came to predominate as an economic system. But it is here that we can sense an inner contradiction in this concept of freedom. Freedom here amounts to freedom to act in accordance with economic laws that, though themselves the product of human social activity, seem to operate independently of human beings, dominating them. Marx writes of

the absurdity of regarding free competition as the ultimate development of human freedom, and the negation of free competition as equivalent to the negation of individual freedom and of social production based upon individual freedom. It is merely the kind of free development possible on the limited basis of the domination of capital. This type of individual freedom is therefore, at the same time, the most sweeping abolition of all individual freedom and the complete subjugation of individuality to social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, indeed of overpowering objects—objects independent of the individuals relating to one another.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of alienation, then, is key to understanding the limitations of this capitalist freedom, which turns out to be human unfreedom in practice. It is the victory of “free competition” that paves the way for the complete subjection of individuals to market forces, which is to say, to their own products. What is necessary now in order to promote the full and expanding freedom of human individuals is not for this concept of bourgeois freedom to be more fully realized than it is. It is already fully realized together with all its inner contradictions. Only its supersession by a higher form of substantive social freedom could resolve them.

In his 1880 preamble to *The Programme of the French Workers' Party*, Marx writes that “the producers cannot be free unless they are in possession of the means of production.”<sup>9</sup> Here, of course, Marx has in mind a substantive human freedom wholly incompatible with the capitalist system, which is in large part premised on producers' lack of ownership of the means of production. Capitalism dispossesses workers of those means further as it develops. Yet it would be mistaken to regard the ideal of this real human emancipation as some *mere* ethical abstraction. It is grounded in existing material reality as a form of freedom appropriate to a collective form of ownership of the means of production. This is a form of emancipation, Marx writes, “whose material

and intellectual elements are shaped by the very development of capitalist society.”<sup>10</sup>

The implementation of such a genuine, substantive freedom would entail what Marx and Engels earlier described, not disapprovingly, as “*despotic inroads* on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production.”<sup>11</sup> It would sit uneasily alongside Locke’s classical liberal conception of men’s natural “*perfect freedom* to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man,” as well as the principle that the proper role of the state is to protect these individual property rights so far as possible, and to hold them inviolable.<sup>12</sup> Should we then conclude from this that Marx was an amoralist, after all? Or that he thought the end of communism justified any means, whatsoever? No. That conclusion only seems compelling if we assume that the political morality of bourgeois liberalism has an absolute validity and that whatever challenges it must therefore be amoral. It would be more correct to say that socialism can be justified on these terms, no less and no more easily than bourgeois revolution might have been justified by appeal to ideologies that upheld the divine right of kings. Socialism is an economic system based on utterly different conditions of existence. For Marx, it is utterly unsurprising that its ideals should sometimes conflict with the old ones.

In the reformist struggles of workers under capitalism, we see a first inkling of how this genuine, substantive freedom comes into conflict with formal, bourgeois freedom. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx writes:

It must be acknowledged that our labourer comes out of the process of production other than he entered. In the market he stood as owner of the commodity “labour-power” face to face with other owners of commodities, dealer against dealer. The contract by which he sold to the capitalist his labour-power proved, so to say, in black and white that he disposed of himself freely. The bargain concluded, it is discovered that he was no “free agent,” that the time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the time for which he is forced to sell it, that in fact the vampire will not lose its hold on him “so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited.” For “protection” against “the serpent of their agonies,” the labourers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death. In place of the pompous catalogue of the “inalienable rights of

man” comes the modest Magna Charta of a legally limited working day, which shall make clear “when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins.” *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* [What a great change from that time!—Virgil].<sup>13</sup>

Here, we find that the worker’s freedom to enter into a contract and to dispose of his labor power as he wills is only a highly limited kind of freedom. In truth, the worker was never in this transaction a totally “free agent” at all, because he is not simply free to sell his labor power or not, but rather is compelled to sell it if he wishes to live. That compulsion makes the worker susceptible to the most brutal working conditions. The freedom to dispose of one’s commodity (in this case, labor power) however one wishes ensures that, each standing alone, working people are ripe victims for “vampiric” capitalist exploitation.

The first step in bringing about substantive freedom from oppressive working conditions and exploitative relations of production is therefore for workers to combine together and push for laws that actually *curtail* the individual freedom of contract granted and guaranteed to them in bourgeois society. These measures on the part of workers are vehemently opposed by the bourgeoisie, not only with such concrete means as police violence and so on, but ideologically, as well:

The same bourgeois mind which praises division of labour in the workshop, life-long annexation of the labourer to a partial operation, and his complete subjection to capital, as being an organisation of labour that increases its productiveness, that same bourgeois mind denounces with equal vigour every conscious attempt to socially control and regulate the process of production, as an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and unrestricted play for the bent of the individual capitalist.<sup>14</sup>

As further illustration of this, Marx describes how in the French Revolution, the rights that could aid workers, such as the right of association, were subordinated in practice to the right of bourgeois property. As compared to all other forms of rights, property rights were granted absolute priority:

During the very first storms of the revolution, the French bourgeoisie dared to take away from the workers the right of association but just acquired.



By a decree of June 14, 1791, they declared all coalition of the workers as “an attempt against liberty and the declaration of the rights of man,” punishable by a fine of 500 livres, together with deprivation of the rights of an active citizen for one year. This law which, by means of State compulsion, confined the struggle between capital and labour within limits comfortable for capital, has outlived revolutions and changes of dynasties. Even the Reign of Terror left it untouched. It was but quite recently struck out of the Penal Code. Nothing is more characteristic than the pretext for this bourgeois coup d’état. “Granting,” says Chapelier, the reporter of the Select Committee on this law, “that wages ought to be a little higher than they are, . . . that they ought to be high enough for him that receives them, to be free from that state of absolute dependence due to the want of the necessities of life, and which is almost that of slavery,” yet the workers must not be allowed to come to any understanding about their own interests, nor to act in common and thereby lessen their “absolute dependence, which is almost that of slavery”; because, forsooth, in doing this they injure “the freedom of their cidevant masters, the present entrepreneurs,” and because a coalition against the despotism of the quondam masters of the corporations is—guess what!—is a restoration of the corporations abolished by the French constitution.<sup>15</sup>

Bourgeois opposition to workers’ attempts to exert social control on production further reveals the practical contradiction between formal bourgeois freedom and the real freedom that workers struggle for within capitalism, in political battles that necessarily point beyond capitalism. While the capitalist defends “sacred” bourgeois freedom, he is at the same time also perfectly willing to defend the real unfreedom of the worker, the “complete subjection” of the laborer to capital. These last several passages highlight, too, the intimate interconnections between “freedom” and “right.” These are two concepts that I isolate from one another here abstractly but only for purposes of presentation and clarity. Let us turn now to Marx’s critiques of liberalism, seen through the lens of his analysis of rights under capitalism.

## Justice and Equal Right

Whether it has been termed a regrettable oversight or something of a scandal, it has been noted that Marx does not seem to justify communism

by appealing to rights. Indeed, this supposed indifference to rights is sometimes cited as evidence of the amorality of Marxist theory.<sup>16</sup> But throughout his early work, Marx presents a critique of rights in the modern state that demonstrates the inadequacy of bourgeois rights theory to address the needs of human beings. His critique of a liberal rights schema is informed by his ethical commitment to the satisfaction of human needs and the development and fulfillment of individual persons as the highest aim for human beings.

The cornerstone of Marx's critique is that bourgeois rights theory relies on an account of individuals as atomized competitors with rival interests, that serves as a holdover from the system of entitlements in feudal society. Rights function in the modern state to protect the privilege of the bourgeoisie. This role, Marx argues, is not an accidental one, but rather part and parcel of rights as such. Therefore, rights are an artifact of class society and the conditions of scarcity, competition, and domination that typify relations among human beings under capitalism. They would have no application in a society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the development of all," nor can they fully justify the transition to such a society.<sup>17</sup> So much the worse, Marx thinks, for rights.

Marx's first major work after his doctoral dissertation is a critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel held that "what is rational is actual"—a pronouncement Marx interpreted to imply that the existing Prussian state represented the most rational form of society, and the resolution of all of the contradictions that had propelled the development of history up until its formation. This reading would imply that no further revolutionary political transformation was either desirable or possible. Marx argues that Hegel fell short of providing an objective account of the nature of right and morality, as such. Instead, Hegel had merely described the structure of the Prussian state and asserted it to be the highest level of social organization possible. In doing so, Marx argued, Hegel downplayed and overlooked the contradictions that still existed within the state. Marx writes:

Hegel is not to be blamed for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but rather for presenting what is as the *essence of the state*. The claim that the rational is actual is contradicted precisely by an irrational actuality, which everywhere is the contrary of what it asserts and asserts the contrary of what it is.<sup>18</sup>

Marx nonetheless regards Hegel's work as extremely fruitful, if not for reasons that Hegel himself had in mind, observing somewhat wryly that “it was a great though unconscious service of Hegel to have assigned modern morality its true position” as intrinsically tied to, and flowing from, the ideological requirements of the modern capitalist state.<sup>19</sup> Marx's corrective is not to sweep Hegel's work aside altogether but to attempt a deeper and more perspicuous assessment of actually existing political reality.

Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* did succeed in demonstrating the manner in which the activity of the modern state is given a moral cover and justification. The government of the Prussian state declared itself to be concerned with public affairs and yet the bureaucracy safeguarded its own interests at the expense of the public. “The Estates,” Marx objects, “are the sanctioned, legal lie of constitutional states, the lie that the state is the people's interest or the people the interest of the state.”<sup>20</sup> This contradiction between the appearance of the modern state and its actual character belies its claim to rationality, suggesting that in order to make a scientific appraisal of the state, it will not be sufficient to evaluate only its ostensive, stated goals. It will be necessary to examine the real activity of the state, and its actual impact and consequences for the human beings who live and are affected by it.

The core of Marx's analysis of rights is his analysis of the relationship between right and privilege. For Marx, rights are a political expression of economic relations. The form that the state takes is determined by the dominant economic form of a society, and by the safeguards needed to protect the privileges of the class upon whom the state is based. Because of this, there is a tendency to transform into morally significant *rights* what already exist as privileges held by the ruling class. In addition to his critique of the Prussian state, it is largely in reference to the National Assembly of France's 1789 Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man that Marx develops his critique of rights, pointing out that the rights of man are historically arisen and contingent, not, as the Declaration asserts, “natural, inalienable, and sacred.”<sup>21</sup>

Hans-Peter Jaeck observes further, in his work *Die französische bürgerliche Revolution von 1789 im Frühwerk von Karl Marx (1843–1846)* (The French Bourgeois Revolution of 1789 in the Early Writings of Karl Marx):

Marx saw, as he had expressed in *The Holy Family*, in the constitutional representative democracy that had been created through the revolution of 1830, the present end-product of the “political expression” of the

bourgeoisie of their own class interests, the official expression of their exclusive power, the political recognition of their particular interests.<sup>22</sup>

The right to private property stands out for Marx as the prime example, the “specific mode of existence of privilege, of rights as exceptions.”<sup>23</sup> This is so because the right to property is itself, *jus utendi et abutendi*, the entitlement to exclusive control over material resources, irrespective of (or at least with minimal possible concern for) the interests of other persons. Similarly, the right to liberty, which is guaranteed by the modern state, is “based not on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself. The practical application of man’s right to liberty is man’s right to *private property*.”<sup>24</sup> Marx continues:

What constitutes man’s right to private property?

Article 16. (Constitution of 1793): “The right of property is that which every citizen has of enjoying and of disposing at his discretion of his goods and income, of the fruits of his labor and industry.”

The right of man to private property is, therefore, the right to enjoy one’s property and to dispose of it at one’s discretion (*à son gré*), without regard to other men, independently of society, the right of self-interest. This individual liberty and its application form the basis of civil society. It makes every man see in other men not the *realization* of his own freedom, but the *barrier* to it.<sup>25</sup>

Depicting the rights of man as *natural* rights, as the modern state does, obscures their basis in historically arisen social antagonisms and egoistic competition. Just as the ancient state had slavery as its economic basis, Marx notes in *The Holy Family* that the modern state is based on capitalism and the man of civil society, that is, “the independent man linked with other men only by the ties of private interest and unconscious natural necessity, the slave of labour for gain and of his own as well as other men’s selfish need.”<sup>26</sup>

Think here for instance of Rousseau’s characterization of the natural liberty with which each man is born. Rousseau acknowledges that there is a natural tie between a child and its parent for the purpose of childrearing. Yet, he insists, “as soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved,” that individuals may revert as soon as possible to their default state of natural independence. He goes on, “This common liberty is a consequence of

man's nature. His first law is to attend to his own survival, his first concerns are those he owes to himself; and as soon as he reaches the age of rationality, being sole judge of how to survive, he becomes his own master.”<sup>27</sup>

Locke earlier posits a similar form of natural independence:

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, *a state of perfect freedom* to order their actions. And further to dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.<sup>28</sup>

While it is necessary to demand that the rights recognized by the modern state and nominally guaranteed to all its citizens are respected and fulfilled, this demand is limited in that these rights are themselves formulated to protect privileges that by and large simply do not exist for the vast majority of persons. (One might consider, for instance, the gap between the formal freedom of speech guaranteed by the United States' constitutional democracy, and the actual, relatively meager, resources available to most individuals to disseminate their viewpoints in an effective way.) Therefore, when it comes to improving the situation of workers, and advancing not just political emancipation, but *human* emancipation (i.e., not merely negative freedom from interference, but also positive freedom to access society's resources and develop one's capabilities and talents), merely securing the rights guaranteed by the modern state remains inadequate. In her 2018 book *Marx and Hegel on the Dialectic of the Individual and the Social*, Sevcı Doğan captures this contradiction when she writes,

In civil society, man as an individual being is the foundation of this society and the presupposition of political life, which is a dilemma. It is a dilemma because on the one hand the individual is a presupposition and foundation of this new society and political state; on the other hand, the individuals exist without their self-activity or without acting both in civil society and in the political state.<sup>29</sup>

As Marx writes in his essay “On the Jewish Question,” contrasting what he calls merely political emancipation from human emancipation, “The limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that the state can free itself from a restriction without man being really free from this restriction,

that the state can be a free state without man being a free man.” Here, Marx refers to the fact that the state may not be a religious state, and yet the citizens of the state may remain in the grips of religion. Further:

One should be under no illusion about the limits of political emancipation. The division of the human being into a *public man* and a *private man*, the *displacement* of religion from the state into civil society, this is not a stage of political emancipation but its completion; this emancipation, therefore, neither abolished the *real* religiousness of man, nor strives to do so.

In a condition of human, rather than merely political, emancipation, the strict division between the public and the private sphere disappears. The human being is able to act as a species-being—his activity is not the activity of an isolated atom, but rather the activity of an individual cooperating with other individuals, who has an understanding of himself as a member of the species, and who regards other persons as the source of his freedom, not as limiting barriers against it. The rights of man do not

go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society—that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community. In the rights of man, he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-like itself, society, appears as a framework external to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence.<sup>30</sup>

However, Marx's analysis of rights is not wholly negative and does not end with his observation that rights have their historical origin in the need to provide moral justification for existing privileges. Indeed, it is the proletariat's lack of privilege that prefigures a new society, one from which privilege is totally absent. Workers have no private property that allows them to compel or direct the labor of other human beings and therefore, Marx argues, no claims that conflict with the ability of other human beings to enjoy access to material resources, if those resources are allocated and employed in a social and rational way.<sup>31</sup> The proletariat satisfies the requirement that “only in the name of the universal rights of society can a particular class lay claim to universal dominance,” and is “a sphere of society . . . claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it.”<sup>32</sup>

So none of this is to say that Marx does not see a place for the discussion of rights and democratic demands in the pursuit of revolutionary ends. In fact, Marx argues that the appeal to rights plays a progressive role in preparing the proletariat to act as a united power.<sup>33</sup> In *The Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx even goes so far as to complain that Max Stirner, author of *The Ego and Its Own*, wrongly denigrates the role that discussion of rights can play in motivating and convincing workers to seize power, presenting proletarians as a “‘closed society,’ which has only to take the decision of ‘seizing’ in order the next day to put a summary end to the entire hitherto existing world order,” when “in reality, the proletarians arrive at this unity only through a long process of development in which the appeal to their right also plays a part.”<sup>34</sup>

Communism is the generalization of the situation of the proletariat, and so the “dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat.”<sup>35</sup> While Marx argues that the proletariat has no “particular right,” he does not mean that it has no rights at all, but rather that the rights of proletarians and of people in a transitional socialist society are quite distinct in content from the rights of man recognized in bourgeois society. They are rights that correspond not to the isolated citizen, guarding his private sphere in a world of competition, but instead, rights that correspond to a person who has no claim to private property and who survives and develops through cooperation with fellow persons with whom she shares a mutual dependence.

So it is an oversimplification to state, as for instance George Brenkert does, that “rights are not part of Marx’s ethics.”<sup>36</sup> We should also take issue with R. G. Peffer, who writes that one of Marx’s criticisms “of justice and rights is based on his misconception that *all* moral theories are ideological in the sense that they *invariably* and *necessarily* support the social status quo.”<sup>37</sup> Quite the contrary. Marx states:

When the proletariat demands the negation of private property it merely elevates into a principle of society what society has advanced as the principle of the proletariat, and what the proletariat already involuntarily embodies as the negative result of society. The proletariat thus has the same right relative to the new world which is coming into being as has the German king relative to the existing world, when he calls the people his people and a horse his horse.<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, Allen Wood's influential study of Marx's moral views also argues that "Marx never claims that [goods such as physical health, comfort, etc.] ought to be provided to people because they have a right to them."<sup>39</sup> It is true that Marx is not in the habit of making moral appeals to capitalists, that they recognize the human rights of workers and "provide" goods to people. However, he does think that it is the proletariat's very lack of private property that entitles them to a society without private property as a defining aspect of social existence. Just as the bourgeois character of existing capitalist society consists in the bourgeoisie's capacity to implement and enforce these conditions that correspond to and serve its own economic interests, so the proletariat seeks to produce a society in which its own circumstances prevail. One key distinction lies in that the proletariat's conditions need not (and would not) appear as privilege: it is possible to make them perfectly general. In *Capital*, Marx lays out more specifically the inherent limits of rights talk as an aid to revolutionary and emancipatory politics, and why any gains made by the worker must be the result of struggle:

The nature of the exchange of commodities itself imposes no limit to the working day, no limit to surplus labour. The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and to make, whenever possible, two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the labourer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to one of definite normal duration. There is here, therefore, an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. Between equal rights force decides. Hence is it that in the history of capitalist production, the determination of what is a working day, presents itself as the result of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e., the working-class.

Marx's approach to rights and justice is similar to his approach to freedom and equality, insofar as bourgeois rights and bourgeois justice are also inadequate as theoretical resources to justify the substantive gains made by workers. However, capitalism does develop productive capacities which would make it possible to realize a higher form of justice, but one that can only be effectively realized with a revolution in the relations of production.



Again, we can recall that for Marx, “the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production.”

However, Marx’s approach to rights has been largely oversimplified and misunderstood. Ziyad Husami raised a similar objection in 1978, lamenting that Wood (and also Robert Tucker) “collapse the Marxian moral theory into the Marxian sociology of morals and ascribe to Marx, by implication, a variant of moral positivism.” Wood claims that “Marx positively denies that capitalist exploitation does the workers any injustice.” Instead, according to Wood, Marx argues that any appeal to a notion of justice on the part of workers would be fundamentally misguided. Wood reads Marx as ruling out as invalid any moral critique of a society that does not appeal to standards that are in line with the existing economic system and serve to uphold it.

Wood believes that a section from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* supports his argument that Marx believes there is no right or justice beyond that which supports and belongs to the existing economic system.<sup>40</sup> Just as Marx argues for a higher form of socialist freedom which cannot simply be reduced to or understood as the realization of bourgeois freedom, so Marx argues for a higher and more substantive theory of human rights which would supersede bourgeois rights. This approach would subsume what is best in them and ultimately supplant them.

Wood quotes a single sentence from Marx’s argument against the Gotha Programme’s call for workers’ “equal rights” to the surplus value and goods created by capitalist production: “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines.”<sup>41</sup> Marx’s remarks, specifically directed at a draft political program for the United Worker’s Party of Germany, are quoted out of that context in Wood’s account, where Wood supposes that Marx’s objection to the Gotha Programme is that it refers to rights at all.<sup>42</sup>

Marx’s objection to the Gotha Programme’s call for equal rights is not that it appeals to the concept of right, but that it calls for the same sort of limited formal equality that is entirely consistent with bourgeois ideology and bourgeois society, and that fails to address the needs of human beings as individuals with individual requirements. The Gotha Programme’s calls for an equal distribution were a step forward, but not a step far enough, since merely to provide each person with an equal share of society’s products would give rise to an effective inequality. Since each person has different

needs unique to his or her condition, merely to give every person an equal share would result in some people having more than they can use, some having just enough, and some having not enough at all.

To avoid this result, "equal right" would have to be applied in such a way as to account for the differences among individuals and their specific needs. It would have to be "unequal" in its content and practical application. Equal right must actually be overcome in a socialist society and replaced with *unequal* right to the products of society.

It is worth reproducing the passage in its entirety:

Right by its nature can exist only as the application of an equal standard; but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals, if they were not unequal) are measurable by an equal standard only insofar as they are made subject to an equal criterion, are taken from a certain side only, for instance, in the present case, are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Besides, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, etc., etc. *Thus, given an equal amount of work done, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, etc. To avoid all these defects, right would have to be unequal rather than equal.*

But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth-pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!<sup>43</sup>

This is the context in which Marx's comment that "Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines" appears. It is impossible to understand this comment

correctly without also considering this passage as a whole. Marx argues that the first phase of communist society would bear certain “defects” with regards to rights as a result of having been born of capitalism. He further refers to the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” that only a “higher phase of communist society” can cross. Not only this, but Marx also has a conception in mind of what standard can replace that of bourgeois right. That standard is, famously, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”

This connects up with earlier criticisms of right in *On the Jewish Question* and *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. In those texts, Marx stresses the lineage of bourgeois right in a system of feudal privilege. This preserves the status of the right to private property as the *sine qua non* of bourgeois right as a whole. That right to private property as the *jus utendi et abutendi*, the right to use or misuse an item irrespective of the interests of others, is inherently antisocial. This is the right of an atomized individual who seeks only to have his private sphere of influence protected against incursions from others or from society as a whole. As such it would have no place in the social life of a system based on such principles as solidarity and communal democratic control over all of humanity’s socially necessary resources.

In a 1979 reply to Husami’s criticisms of his 1972 essay “The Marxian Critique of Justice,” Wood does note that what he describes as “Marx’s moralistic self-indulgence . . . contrasts strikingly with his abstemious and even contemptuous attitude toward the use of moral norms and values (such as right and justice) in the criticism or defense of basic social arrangements themselves.” Wood does not offer an explanation for this contrast there, although he claims again in his 1999 book *Karl Marx*, that Marx “sees moral norms as having no better foundation than their serviceability to transient forms of human social intercourse, and most fundamentally, to the social requirements of a given mode of production.”<sup>44</sup>

Marx certainly does believe that it is not possible to realize a given rights schema unless the appropriate material basis exists to support it. But Wood is mistaken in taking this to mean that for Marx it is illegitimate to criticize an existing society by appeal to any rights schema that does not itself uphold and legitimize the society in question. Indeed, the crux of Marx’s criticism of capitalist society in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* seems to be *exactly* this: that bourgeois right is narrow and defective when compared to the standard that would be realized in a communist society.

A further example of Marx's willingness to critique capitalist justice is found in the first volume of *Capital*. Here, Marx describes a scheme to reimburse landowners for the expropriation of their private property:

Admire this capitalistic justice! The owner of land, of houses, the businessman, when expropriated by "improvements" such as railroads, the building of new streets, &c., not only receives full indemnity. He must, according to law, human and divine, be comforted for his enforced "abstinence" over and above this by a thumping profit. The labourer, with his wife and child and chattels, is thrown out into the street, and—if he crowds in too large numbers towards quarters of the town where the vestries insist on decency, he is prosecuted in the name of sanitation!<sup>45</sup>

Wood argues that for Marx, "a higher mode of production is not 'more just' than a lower one; it is only just in its own way." Certainly, Marx might agree that capitalism is "just in its own way." However, not only can Wood's reading not account for the biting sarcasm with which Marx speaks of such "capitalist justice," but it cannot make good sense of Marx's indictment of bourgeois right as *defective* and *narrow* when compared with the "unequal" rights of a transitional socialist society, or with the conception of right whose content would finally be concretely realized in an abundantly productive communist society.

Why do commentators such as Brenkert, Peffer, and Wood make the error of suggesting that Marx denies the possibility of offering coherent ethical critique of capitalist values?<sup>46</sup> They recall that Marx tells us the ruling ideas in a society are always those of the ruling class, and they remember his observation that consciousness is always consciousness of concrete social existence. However, they forget something of vital importance, something one would not expect to have slip one's mind in a discussion of Marxist theory: namely, that the proletariat and its struggle also exist. Roughly three-quarters of a century before Peffer, Wood, and other Analytical Marxists engaged the question of Marx and ethics, precisely this mistake was being made by the German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein. At the time, German communist and revolutionist Rosa Luxemburg reminded him, too, of the importance of Marx's dialectics. Without these, it is difficult if not impossible to make sense of the validity of proletarian values within a capitalist system. Luxemburg's words from well over a century ago still stand:

What is Marx’s “dualism” if not the dualism of the socialist future and the capitalist present? It is the dualism of capitalism and labor, the dualism of the individuals, bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It is the scientific reflection of the dualism existing in bourgeois society, the dualism of the class antagonism writhing inside the social order of capitalism.<sup>47</sup>

The case for reading Marx as a theorist with a consistent ethical critique of capitalism is at once the case for reading him with his dialectical materialism intact. Without it, we are led away from his most key insight: that the better world of tomorrow is not some merely abstract utopian ethical ideal, but instead an already unfolding process that is already really existent in the present state of things.

### Rights and/in Communism

Igor Shoikhedbrod, in his 2019 book *Revisiting Marx’s Critique of Liberalism*, presents a reading of Marx on rights that would tend to complicate the account I have offered here. Shoikhedbrod argues against the view, held by many of Marx’s detractors along with many who take up the Marxist tradition, that Marx conceived of fully developed communism as a form of society in which rights had, lacking the material basis they once had in the schisms of class society, “withered away.” Shoikhedbrod presents a detailed account of Marx’s evolving views on the nature of right, and his arguments are thought-provoking and lucid. While I think he is absolutely right about such claims as that communists ought to be champions of the rule of law in bourgeois society and ought not to indulge cheap cynicism about the role played by such legal doctrines, I will say a bit here about why I part ways with Shoikhedbrod’s insistence that communist society would feature right and law as superstructural elements.

The notion of right that is relevant to our discussion is that found in the liberal political philosophy of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and others in the social contract theory tradition. In this tradition, having rights—or not having them—is the difference between being someone to whom anything may permissibly be done and being someone with morally salient boundaries that others, who might be in a position to interact with you, must respect. Key to Shoikhedbrod’s argument is that although historically and conceptually rooted in the

conditions of bourgeois society, rights of this kind can outlast capitalist social relations, and that although the specific content may change, various prohibitions and entitlements bearing the *form* of a right can and should persist in communist society. "Rather than forecasting the 'transcendence' of rights in communist society," Shoikhedbrod writes, "Marx's new materialist theory points to the possibility of superseding the narrow horizon of bourgeois right."<sup>48</sup>

Shoikhedbrod continues,

It is therefore a mistake to conclude that the historical achievements of capitalism, including the granting of formal legal rights, would be annihilated under communism. Abolishing elementary formal rights would mean reverting to pre-capitalist social relations, in which the direct domination of the master, lord, or patriarchal community actively inhibited the free development of individuals. Marx did not wish to return to the ruins of the past; rather, he maintained that some elements of the past would be preserved in a superseded form.<sup>49</sup>

But it is not so readily obvious that the withering away of right would have the effect Shoikhedbrod predicts; after all, it is not true that every previous form of human society in which the formal, individual rights of bourgeois society did not inhere, was one in which direct domination was the order of the day. For example, as I noted in Chapter 2, Marx intended a historical materialist treatment of anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan's findings on early societies in the Americas. This work was later taken up by Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Where philosophers in the liberal, social contractarian tradition reasoned from an account of individuals as rational abstractions seeking their own private self-interest within an imagined "state of nature," Marx and Engels emphasized the importance of proceeding from empirical facts about the real life-activity of human beings.

A great deal of Marx's and Engels's excitement regarding Morgan's work was what it revealed about the impermanence of various features of class society that others of their contemporaries tended to take for granted. Engels criticizes the assumption that patriarchy, for example, is a natural default for human beings, writing, "One of the most absurd notions taken over from 18th century enlightenment is that in the beginning of society woman was the slave of man." He goes on to emphasize that among hunter-gatherer

and early agricultural societies, “the position of women is not only free, but honorable.”<sup>50</sup>

Engels goes on to note that in some of the earliest recorded forms of human society in the Americas, “Within the tribe there is as yet no difference between rights and duties; the question whether participation in public affairs, in blood revenge or atonement, is a right or a duty does not exist for the Indian; it would seem to him just as absurd as the question whether it was a right or a duty to sleep, eat, or hunt.”<sup>51</sup>

His arguments are drawn not only from accounts of the lives of Native people in the Americas (especially the Iroquois); Engels expands the empirical basis of his theorizing with observations on early Greek, Roman, and Germanic peoples. On this basis, Engels concludes that with the division of labor and the creation of a productive surplus, earlier, less hierarchical forms of human organization dissolved and the state emerged as a solution to social antagonisms brought about by economic changes. Engels uses the term “gentile” to refer to groups of tribes bound together by kinship ties:

The gentile constitution had grown out of a society which knew no internal contradictions, and it was only adapted to such a society. It possessed no means of coercion except public opinion. But here was a society which by all its economic conditions of life had been forced to split itself into freemen and slaves, into the exploiting rich and the exploiting poor; a society which not only could never again reconcile these contradictions, but was compelled always to intensify them. Such a society could only exist either in the continuous open fight of these classes against one another or else under the rule of a third power, which, apparently standing above the warring classes, suppressed their open conflict and allowed the class struggle to be fought out at most in the economic field, in so-called legal form. The gentile constitution was finished. It had been shattered by the division of labor and its result, the cleavage of society into classes. It was replaced by the *state*.<sup>52</sup>

While it is true that, as Shoikhedbrod notes, “Marx did not wish to return to the ruins of the past,” we ought not to infer from there that all Marx and Engels found in the past were ruins. There are early forms of communal life in which “rights” were not part of the social landscape, and which Marx and Engels see as examples of how greatly human social organization can diverge from what we have come to take for granted. These echoes of the past form part of a progression of chords, as it were, finding its resolution in



a new historical form that does not merely repeat the past but that does find inspiration in it, relating to it as a part of the whole. And the example of early human societies gives us good reason to think it simply does not follow, from the absence of formal, legal right, that the inhibition of individuals' free development will ensue.

I have described already in earlier sections how Marx's theory of alienation is closely connected to his critique of bourgeois rights. We see this connection spelled out quite explicitly in the following passage from the first volume of *Capital*:

At first the rights of property seemed to us to be based on a man's own labour. At least, some such assumption was necessary since only commodity-owners with equal rights confronted each other, and the sole means by which a man could become possessed of the commodities of others, was by alienating his own commodities; and these could be replaced by labour alone. Now, however, property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and to be the impossibility, on the part of the labourer, of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labour has become the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity.<sup>53</sup>

Alienation is the predictable outcome of a society in which human labor power itself is a commodity to be bought and sold. It will reliably appear in a society where one is compelled by economic considerations to sell off the essential aspect of one's human being—one's capacity to produce—and make it the property of someone else to whom one stands in hostile relation. Marx quite clearly is critical of liberal values.

Philip Kain captures the issue succinctly in his book *Marx and Ethics*, where he writes,

For Marx . . . to realize one's essence, one must do so consciously and this requires communal interaction. One must work consciously within and for the community, for the species, the universal. Rights, then, would be rights against others, against the community, and against one's essence, the universal.<sup>54</sup>

A right, we must recall, is a special kind of claim. And like any claim, it is a claim *against* some entity which is obliged—whether ethically, legally, or



both—to honor it. In a fully developed communist society, everyone has a “right” to their conditions of flourishing in just the same way that everyone is a member of the same economic class. The political and historical conversion of proletarian class membership into a condition general to all human beings makes it the case that, while we are well at liberty to *call* that a class society, it is *not* a class society in any contentful sense of the term. This is what it means to say that in making its conditions of existence general, the proletariat abolishes itself as a class, abolishing class society with it. Similar is to be said of rights.

To have an individual, formal “right” to that thing which is absolutely required for the flourishing of every other person in society is conceptually and normatively superfluous. In a society in which the flourishing of each conduces to the flourishing of all, what discursive function can rights talk serve? In the communist society envisioned by Marxist theory, to say, “I have a right to those conditions which permit my flourishing” is exactly and directly the same thing as to say, “I have a right to *your* having those conditions which permit *your* flourishing.” If my flourishing is also directly yours, which both of us seek to promote (as the “rich individuals” described in Chapter 3), what does it add to formulate my conditions of flourishing as a *right* to be defended (from whom)? I think the answer here is that it adds as much and as little as would be added by the insistence that communism is a class society just as capitalism is, with the only distinction being that it is a “class society” made up of a single class.

This is not, however, to dismiss Shoikhedbrod’s well-taken points about the role of appeal to certain kinds of rights and entitlements in a class society. It is, however, to insist that at least as a reading of Marx, these insights ought to be taken as fully compatible with the claim that such right will wither away.

## 8

## Marx's Critiques of Rival Moral Theories

But capital not only lives upon labour.  
Like a master, at once distinguished and barbarous,  
it drags with it into its grave the corpses of its slaves,  
whole hecatombs of workers, who perish in the crises.<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter, we discussed Marx's critiques of specific theoretical concepts that figure largely in the social contractarian philosophies of figures such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Namely, we surveyed Marx's criticisms of concepts of freedom, justice, and right that masqueraded as universal, but in the end were thoroughly and specifically bourgeois, reflecting the capitalist class's conditions of existence and its class interests. In the present chapter, we expand our lens and turn to Marx's critiques of four prominent ethical systems or perspectives. These are Christian ethics, Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and lastly, Malthusianism. In doing so, we both continue our discussion of Marx's critique of liberalism and find an opportunity to address one of the most important challenges to the notion that it could make sense to speak of a Marxist ethical vision: namely, that Marx is blisteringly hostile to more or less every ethical theory he ever takes into consideration.

Marx's critiques of rival moral theories have been taken as evidence that he regards ethical judgments and ethical theorizing as idle at best, inherently reactionary at worst. Especially if one misinterprets Marx as a strictly fatalistic economic determinist, then it might seem tempting to imagine him hostile to all normative theorizing in the realm of human values whatsoever and to conclude that Marxist theory offers no theoretical basis upon which to reason about what one *ought* to do and how humans ought to live. But Marx's critique of these rival moralities does not stem from any such simplistic mechanistic determinism. It flows from his historical materialist perspective with nuance that I will lay out here just in brief for the moment, for the purpose of introduction. To explore in greater detail his critiques of these

theories and that critique's relationship to the method of historical materialism is the work of this chapter's remaining sections.

One aspect of Marx's approach to ethics, which has puzzled his interpreters, is that he accuses Christian and liberal moralities of being reactionary even (sometimes especially!) when they prescribe some of the very same prosocial forms of life that, according to Marx himself, human beings would express in a fully developed communist society. We cannot distinguish Marx's ethical vision from these other perspectives just in terms of what they each might regard as a desirable state of affairs for human beings to strive toward as their end. (We will find this to be especially apparent in Marx's criticisms of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism.)

One key respect in which these noncommunist views differ—and in Marx's opinion, in which they err—is in commanding that human beings always act *now* as they might in that better world. A Marxist approach to ethics proceeds from the concrete reality of the matter, namely that such a world does not yet exist. It asks what we might do in order to really bring about that world of human beings acting humanely toward one another. Central to Marx's criticism of the rival views is that they each in their own way flee from materialism and into a realm of ahistorical ideal abstraction. In doing so, they frequently, paradoxically, command behavior that makes a really existing better world *less likely* if not outright impossible to achieve. They frequently prohibit precisely those actions and that behavior that would be necessary for the antagonism, alienation, domination, subjection, and suffering of our present world to be overcome. In this way, they function to prevent the very same norms and values they extol from ever actually being universally instantiated. (Here, as is so often the case, Marx's lesson is that we cannot accurately analyze a philosophical idea except by inquiring into how it really functions within the society from which it emerges and within which it holds ideological sway. We can abstractly push concepts around in our minds all day, but the real test is whether some form of thought aids human beings' capacity to intervene consciously and rationally into their existence so as to develop themselves as a species, or not.) For Marx, ethics is subsumed within "the science of history"—it is made a question of how to bring about, as a realized historical fact, that fulfillment toward which the species strives.

Although Marx presents numerous critiques of dominant moral theories throughout his writings, he devotes special attention to Christian ethics, to Kantianism, and to Utilitarianism (and therefore, in this chapter, so do I).

He argues that each depends, in one way or another, upon a mistaken conception of human nature. In the case of Christianity, we have a perspective that encourages human beings to turn away from worldly things and to sacrifice their worldly needs and material interests in service to God. Christianity gives theoretical and spiritual expression to the alienation that human beings experience, but the longing for unalienated life must make do with a promise of fulfillment in the world beyond. While among various forms of Christianity the details vary, they share the conviction that to be alienated, to live a form of life in which one exists out of alignment with what one “truly” is, is an ineluctable feature of worldly human existence. In Christian perspectives, alienation is a spiritual condition that can be overcome only with the destruction of the material body and the persistence of one’s eternal soul freed from the anchor of the concrete—only in physical death and everlasting spiritual reunion with God. Moreover, whether one does achieve reunion with God in turn depends upon one’s success in spurning the material world throughout one’s years of spiritual exile in it. We might be put in mind here of the following lines from the Gospel of John:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.<sup>2</sup>

Christian metaphysics thus recognizes the historicity and dynamism of the world while simultaneously regarding that impermanence as suspect; only the unchanging and eternal can be real and true. These can never be features of material existence, but they can with some immediate plausibility be imputed to the concept of God. Thus, while as previously stated, the particulars will vary among different Christian perspectives, in Christian ethical approaches, concerns with worldly matters will always be subordinated to and ultimately superseded by the demand to conform one’s will with the will of God.

More to say about this later, but as we continue to set the stage, let us turn to a brief précis of Marx’s critique of Immanuel Kant, which also brings us more squarely back to Marx’s critiques of liberal moral and political theory generally. Kantian ethics’ defining command is what Kant refers to in his 1785 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* as “The Categorical Imperative,”

which is to “act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

This imperative is categorical as opposed to merely hypothetical. That is to say, Kant presents it as a norm that follows logically from conceptual analysis of the nature of a will as such and not from any particular antecedent determinate *content* of that will. For Kant, to be in accordance with one's essential nature as a rational, willing subject is to resist the temptation of one's contingent, private concerns and desires and to conform one's will with that which reason commands of all rational, willing subjects.

Kant's ethics represent a specific engagement with longstanding philosophical debates regarding the relationship between the material and the ideal, and between subject and object, especially as these questions about agency and metaphysical substance apply to the interrelation between freedom and necessity. The apparent lawlikeness of the physical world makes it seem a hostile place for human agency, for if physical laws determine the order of the universe, what does this mean for physically embodied creatures such as ourselves who like to think ourselves free?

To set before human beings the task of aligning their will with the universal law is to propose that there is some part of them upon which the determining laws that appear to govern so much of the world do not, or at least need not, impinge. For Kant, then, to allow one's will to be determined by one's contingent material interests is to misuse it, for the essential nature of the will is to be active, agential, and wholly undetermined by that which is external to it. By abstracting away from any of the specific determinations that characterize a particular individual and her interests and render her an individual subject distinct from others, one realizes one's nature as a willing subject and instantiates one's essential freedom by willing in conformity with the universal law.

Here one also resolves, at least at the level of theory, the problem of multiple and conflicting particular interests which arise in a society of individuals each pursuing their own private good. By setting particular interests aside as inessential and inherently misleading with respect to the question of how one ought to act, Kantian morality offers a philosophical resolution to real social antagonisms that otherwise typically seem intractable and adjudicable. Only that ought to be done which one can rationally and coherently will for absolutely everyone to do.

Almost needless to say, Kant's emphasis on the spontaneity of the undetermined free will is incompatible with the historical materialist insistence

that human beings do not form their wills in a purely autonomous way. Human beings, Marxist theory insists, always exist within particular historical conditions that, to greater or lesser extents given the specific circumstances, determine them in ways they cannot directly control. As we saw in Chapter 5, this is not at all to say that human beings are unfree and do not exercise agency. Rather, it is to say that the notion of the wholly undetermined free will is a nonstarter. Human freedom comes not by retreating from worldly concerns and desires, but rather by engaging with the world in a way that allows one to realize one's aims in it, expand one's array of practical capacities, and recognize oneself as a member of a species for whom labor is the essential activity.

For Marx, the resolution to social antagonisms is not to scorn private interest in favor of universally valid moral law, nor to eschew the content of the will in favor of its abstract form. Rather, Marx's method is on the one hand, to analyze the content of the particular wills and interests that stand arrayed against one another in social conflict, and on the other, to reason about which of these is poised, through the pursuit of their really existing material interests, to reconcile the social antagonisms that make strife, domination, and chaos the likeliest outcomes of individual human beings all seeking to satisfy their individual desires within a class society. Put more succinctly: in Kantian ethics, the conflict between individual and society is resolved in thought with an ethical command to individuals that they abandon their private aims. Marxist theory proposes, as a practical task, that the world itself be rearranged by those in whose private interest it would be to create a world where all human beings could realize their aims in ways that do not impede, and rather facilitate, others doing the same.

Utilitarianism is the third ethical theory we will discuss in this chapter; it is also the most distinctively "capitalist" of the three and the one to which we will devote the most sustained attention. Utilitarianism is a species of consequentialism, that family of ethical theories which maintain that we ought to do that which brings about the best consequences. For utilitarian views, that means that we ought to do that which brings about the most utility, a principle which is expressed variously by utilitarianism's many proponents. Some examples of utilitarian formulations among its most famous advocates include that we ought to bring about "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Jeremy Bentham), that we ought to "maximize happiness" (John Stuart Mill), or that we ought to "minimize suffering" (Peter Singer).

Utilitarian theory does not demand—or at least, does not appear to demand—commitment to any particular robust metaphysical doctrine about the nature of human beings aside from what seems obvious at the phenomenal level; namely, that human beings have the capacity to experience pleasure and pain, and tend to prefer the former to the latter. One then proceeds from the fact of these preferences and, in the context of specific ethical questions and problems, reasons about what course of action is most likely to satisfy them. This apparent ecumenicism makes utilitarian ethics enormously popular in applications that require practitioners to reason ethically about situations involving diverse populations with values and worldviews that mutually conflict. Utilitarianism is, for all effects and purposes, the default morality of most liberal policymaking institutions, especially those that are internationalist in scope.

Marx focuses especially on two classical utilitarian theorists in the course of his writings: these are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. His approaches to these philosophers are quite different, as we will see. But central to Marx's overall critique of utilitarianism is his view that utilitarianism substitutes one relation—usefulness—for an irreducibly infinite multiplicity of human social relations. Marx argues that for this reason, while utilitarianism claims ecumenicism, it in fact relies upon a distorted and narrow picture of human social being. In this sense, the concept of “utility” mirrors the abstraction of money by flattening, even obliterating, the *qualitative* differences in how things matter to us.

Let us be reminded that Marx writes of money, “Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and confuses all things, it is the general *confounding and confusing* of all things—the world upside-down—the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities.”<sup>3</sup> We will keep this in mind when we turn again shortly to his critique of the concept of utility and its particular suitedness to the logic of capitalism.

Lastly, I will discuss Marx's critiques of Malthusianism. These are particularly useful for us because Marx regards Malthusianism as an especially odious version of the subordination of human beings to capital, where the actual concrete existence of human beings in the planet is deemed excessive where it might conflict with, or in any case, fail to further enable, private capitalist accumulation. This is of especial relevance as we countenance the impending threats to humanity posed, for example, by poverty, climate collapse, and pandemic illness.

Marx's critique is not just that these theories err with respect to human nature, but that they specifically err in ways that rationalize tolerance of hierarchy and domination in the present, lending ideological legitimacy to capitalism and disorganizing resistant movements against it. Over the course of this chapter, we will take each of these moral systems in turn and explore how this is the case. Analyzing Marx's criticisms of these approaches will in turn lend us further insight into the ethical content of his theory.

## Marx and Christianity

Religion, according to Marx, is an expression of the alienation that is a hallmark of human life in class society. Religion is also a response to that alienation and even, at times, a kind of proto-rebellion against it. In the 1844 introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx writes, "This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*."<sup>4</sup> Myths and characters that human beings create appear as forces that exist independently of human beings. The causal relationship between human beings and their gods is inverted in religious belief; divine characters are believed to have created the very human beings who imagined them. In this way, religion is a symptom of a society in which human beings' active labor, and the products of that laboring, confront humans generally as independent entities that determine human existence quite apart from humans' capacity to intervene and direct them.

For these reasons, so long as the objective conditions giving rise to religion remain, it will be insufficient and largely futile simply to attempt (vainly, I might add) to "debunk" religious belief and provide supposed proofs of its logical incoherence or empirical falsity. It is the actual irrationality of human life in class society that gives rise to the irrationalism codified in religion and only a rational reordering of human life can abolish religion's real material basis.

At the same time, Marx recognizes that, as he puts it, "the miserableness of religion is at once the expression of real misery and the protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people."<sup>5</sup> Religion plays a significant social role as one of very few consolations available to the oppressed. It defers hopes for a better world to



the world beyond; yet that it expresses and affirms the aspiration for an end to human misery and strife is no small virtue.

Marx in his early works was not alone among the Young Hegelians in criticizing religion. Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner, and others each devoted a great deal of philosophical attention to the falsity of religion, to its reactionary role in holding back social, intellectual, and political progress, and to the need for its abolition. What separates Marx from the other thinkers in his milieu is Marx's argument that the abolition of religion is not primarily a matter of irreligious materialists winning a battle of ideas against belief in the supernatural. Only once the real, oppressive, alienating conditions that give rise to religion and which are expressed in religion have been overthrown, Marx argued, could religion fade away.

Marx's specific criticisms of Christian morality are to be seen in this light. Once it is believed by human beings, religion does itself become a material force with a role to play in determining human social existence. However, religion is not itself to be identified as the ultimate *source* of human troubles. It is the other way 'round: when material conditions frustrate humans' capacity to recognize their form of life as their own historical product and to transform it, then human troubles and the possibility of their resolution come to be expressed in sublimated religious form.

The critique of religion in general and of Christianity in particular is necessary not merely as a tactical maneuver in some ideological battle, but because it helps to demonstrate and reveal what real change is necessary in the material conditions of human beings and in society. As Marx writes in his 1844 *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, "The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual aroma."<sup>6</sup> He goes on:

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man, the root is man himself. . . . The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*—hence, with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.<sup>7</sup>

Marx's opposition to the particular morality espoused by Christianity is based in large part on the fact that he sees Christian morality as an ethic of servility and self-denial. As such, he takes it to be at odds with a moral outlook centered on the development and self-fulfillment of human beings. One of his most extended treatments of Christian morality in his early work appears as a little-discussed literary critique of Christian values as they are depicted and expressed in Eugene Sue's popular 1843 novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*. It is to this discussion that we will now turn.

In the final chapters of *The Holy Family*, Marx critiques the moral lessons drawn by the Young Hegelian "Szeliga" from Sue's novel. ("Szeliga" is a pseudonym of Franz Zychlin von Zychlinski, a follower of Bruno Bauer.) *Les Mystères de Paris* tells the story of Rudolphe, an aristocrat who disguises himself as a worker and goes on to "rescue" two working-class people from their fates. One of these is "Fleur de Marie," a sex worker who thinks of her situation as "inhuman," but who herself exudes strength and "preserves a human nobleness of soul."<sup>8</sup> Marie judges her own moral standing by the extent to which she has helped or harmed other human beings, and judges her situation as good or bad according to the extent to which it helps or hinders her in expressing her nature. Marx observes, "She measures her situation in life by her *own individuality*, her *essential nature*, not by the *ideal* of *what is good*."<sup>9</sup>

Our hero, Rudolphe, rescues Marie from life in the city and removes her to the countryside, placing her under the care of a Madame George.<sup>10</sup> Marie is taught Christian morality, and learns that in order to become worthy of her "rescue" she must give herself over to God:

From this moment Marie is *enslaved by the consciousness of sin*. In her former most unhappy situation in life she was able to develop a lovable, human individuality; in her outward debasement she was conscious that *her human essence was her true essence*.<sup>11</sup>

She must sacrifice and deny herself, renouncing the joys and satisfactions of earthly life so that she might be worthy of heavenly life. She enters a convent and learns not to see other human beings as the ground of her fulfillment and satisfaction, but rather to seek validation and approval in a supernatural, alien God. She retreats from the world into the life of the convent where she eventually dies, fittingly (or in any case, melodramatically) enough, uttering a prayer with her final breath.

In his 1999 treatment of Marx on *Les Mystères de Paris*, Ricardo Brown writes,

Marx puts forward the materialist view that it is through sensuous activity—in love and in labor—that humans experience the world. It is within sensuous activity that we experience the production of desire, the utilization of human impulses, and the historical materiality of human relations. This sensuous activity has, since the end of feudalism, been increasingly expressed in the production of the general ideological practices of capital, commodity fetishism and the concealment of bourgeois morality through the production of the “mystery of speculative love.”<sup>12</sup>

I disagree with Brown's conclusion that Marx's ethical dimensions are grounded principally in finding “the ethical in the materiality of pleasure.” However, Brown's *centering* of pleasure and desire in his careful reconstruction of a Marxist ethics is a salutary intervention into the conversation about Marxist ethics, most especially because it brings sharply into focus Marx's sharp hostility toward asceticism, self-abnegation, and *sacrifice* as ethical ideals.<sup>13</sup>

Marx's excursion into literary criticism is no mere digression. Where Szeliga presents this tale as an excellent bit of moral didactic, Marx means to show that the Christian morality which is supposed to redeem its adherents “saves” only by destroying the individual person who must renounce her earthly existence in exchange for heavenly life. We can recall Marx's discussion of the concrete individual in his doctoral dissertation. It is only in relation to the other concrete objects that exist in the material world that an individual can find development, expression, and existence. Marie's “Christian consolation,” then, “is precisely the annihilation of her real life and essence—her death.”<sup>14</sup> Her withdrawal from the world is the annihilation of her individuality and being.

Several years later, in an 1847 article for the *Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung*, Marx is only more strident in his arguments for why Christian morality and its basis in a doctrine of original sin and redemption is inadequate as a theory of human liberation.<sup>15</sup> His argument is formulated against the claim made by a Prussian state functionary that there is no need for “all this tedious talk of communism, if only those who have the vocation for it develop the social principles of Christianity, then the Communists will soon fall silent.” Marx's reply merits quoting at length:

The social principles of Christianity have now had eighteen hundred years to be developed, and need no further development by Prussian Consistorial Counsellors. The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorifies the serfdom of the Middle Ages and are capable, in case of need, of defending the oppression of the proletariat, even if with somewhat doleful grimaces. The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable. The social principles of Christianity place the Consistorial Counsellor's compensation for all infamies in heaven, and thereby justify the continuation of these infamies on earth. The social principles of Christianity declare all the vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either a just punishment for original sin and other sins, or trials which the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, ordains for the redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness, in short, all the qualities of the rabble, and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread. The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical, and the proletariat is revolutionary.

So much for the social principles of Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Marx's point is that beyond the personal costs borne by the individual who practices a self-denying renunciation of earthly life, there is the role that Christianity has historically played on a broader social scale. Marx charges that it has preached accommodation to the status quo and inculcated in the masses of human beings traits that render them more easily governable by the ruling class, dissuading them from seeking a new social arrangement here on earth.

Marx concludes *The Holy Family's* famous opium metaphor with the following observation:

To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, given Marx's frequent criticisms of religion, he repeatedly insisted that he was not an atheist, a denial I explicated in a 2019 paper on Marx and atheism. I explained there that Marx's critique of religion goes beyond the rejection of theistic traditions to encompass a rejection of all perspectives that subordinate the good of human beings to some supposedly higher end and obscure humanity's role as its own author. Moreover, Marx proposes no answer to the question "Does God exist?" and is far more concerned with demonstrating that the question itself is incoherent. And so, I argued that Marxism is best thought of not as an atheistic perspective, but as a "radically irreligious" one. I wrote,

For Marx, atheism on its own does not go far enough. It makes a negative existential claim that there is no God. But to be irreligious, it is necessary to go further than this, to insist that not only is there no God, but there is no value whatsoever more important than that of human existence in its fullness, which encompasses the values of human welfare, human development, human agency, and human creative potential.

Hence when it comes to religion, for Marx the defining question is not whether or not God exists. It is, rather, whether or not one irreligiously affirms the flourishing of human individuals in community with one another as the highest value for human beings, and engages in radical political practice aimed at the furtherance and concrete realization of this principle.<sup>18</sup>

### Marx and Kantian Morality

Kant und Fichte gern zum Aether schweifen  
Suchten dort ein fernes Land,  
Doch ich such nur tüchtig zu begreifen,  
Was ich—auf der Straße fand!<sup>19</sup>

Karl Marx's theoretical work draws from, and stands within, several philosophical traditions that themselves intersect and overlap with one another. His emphasis on the life of the species and on humanity's conditions for flourishing and for realizing its essential nature, for example, situate him as an heir of Aristotelian virtue ethics, a point made by Alasdair Macintyre, Paul Blackledge, and John Gregson, among other commentators.<sup>20</sup>

Marx's relentless critique of the German Idealist tradition can obscure the fact, but importantly, he is heavily influenced by that tradition and occupies a special relation to it both within it and without. Just as, depending on how one draws the lines historiographically, Immanuel Kant is either the first German Idealist author or the author in response to whom the German Idealist tradition emerged, so Marx represents the rejection of that tradition—or, perhaps, we should rather say that the German Idealist tradition finds its culmination in his refusal and supersession of it.<sup>21</sup> Marx himself identified Hegel's philosophy as the highest expression of German Idealism and, ipso facto, of bourgeois philosophy as a whole. He famously described his and Engels's own materialist conception of history as the attempt to set Hegelian dialectics on its feet instead of on its head as they'd found it—to preserve the “rational kernel” bound within the “mystical shell” of idealist metaphysics.<sup>22</sup>

All of this makes it not particularly surprising that one perennial fascination among interpreters of Marx has concerned whether, and to what extent, Marx's theory might be compatible with the normative elements of Kant's system. The thought, typically, is something like the following: “If Marx's worldview lacks its own moral theory, why don't Marxists adopt the plausible one Kant came up with?”

But while the scholarship on Marx often addresses the relationship between Marx's and Kant's philosophies, only quite seldom did Marx himself mention Kant by name. What he does have to say about Kant is generally not complimentary, but it is illuminating. Marx's comments on Kantianism allow us to better understand what Marx took to be historical materialism's major points of divergence from Kantian philosophy. They also shed additional light upon Marx's criticisms of philosophical idealism as a whole.

My aim in this section is twofold. Firstly, it is to present Marx's critique of Kant and to discuss how this critique figures into Marx's perspective on the nature of ethics. Secondly, it is to answer the question posed above. Marx took his theory to be incompatible with Kantian morality, and I seek to show that—be it for better or for worse—he was correct in thinking so. Kantian ethics are not available for a Marxist theory to absorb. To make the case for the second point, I will evaluate the contours of early twentieth-century debates among leading figures in German Social Democracy who debated exactly this question. I will also address more recent attempts to synthesize Marxism and Kantian ethics and show how, in spite of themselves, these rather demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility of the two theoretical systems. If, as these advocates of synthesis tend to assume, Marxism is so

wedded to a strict, fatalistic determinism that it cannot account for ethics, then the theory would be even worse off than they claim, because it admits of no supplementation from Kantian morality.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of Kantian ethics, followed by a presentation of Marx's critique of Kant. We will then be positioned to understand and evaluate the Marx-Kant debates of the early twentieth century and of today. So let us first present the outlines of Kant's moral philosophy, in brief.

### Kantian Ethics

A central consideration for Kant, and for the figures of the German Idealist tradition sparked by his philosophical insights, is the attempt to arrive at a correct understanding of the relationship between material and ideal aspects of Being; namely, an understanding that would account both for the possibility of scientific knowledge about the world and for the possibility of human freedom in that world. One tension between the two desiderata is that scientific knowability can seem to hinge on a lawlikeness of the world that would tend to rule out the possibility of freedom in the world. In resisting, for example, David Hume's challenges to scientific and philosophical attempts to assert causation as an objective feature of external reality (as is the case, for example, in Newtonian physics), Kant embraced and defended the notion of lawlikeness in Being, which then left the problem of how to account for the sort of human freedom that would be compatible with a practice of moral judgment.<sup>23</sup>

Kant's solution to that problem was to suppose an autonomous, "rational free will," upon which notion his moral theory also rests. The free (ideal, abstract, spiritual) will differs from material (concrete, physical) objects that behave in a lawlike manner determined by the impact of external forces acting upon them. It is *like* the rest of Being in that it behaves and is determined in a lawlike way, and *unlike* the rest of Being in that the law by which it is determined is one that it gives to itself. Through its exercise of pure reason, the rational, free will ascertains universal Moral Law and binds itself to it. In this way, Kant sought to dissolve the puzzle for moral judgment that is posed by determinism about the physical world. All of Being behaves deterministically and all of Being is caused. But the objective and subjective aspects of Being are caused in importantly different ways. This solution both brings the

will under the same conditions as the rest of Being and sets it apart as that aspect of Being which is determined only by itself, through reason.

We see this doctrine at work in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where he writes,

The will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational, and freedom would be this property of such causality that it can be efficient, independently of foreign causes determining it; just as physical necessity is the property that the causality of all irrational beings has of being determined to activity by the influence of foreign causes.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, Kant conceptually reconciles an apparent contradiction between freedom and determinism. He presents a metaphysical picture in which what appeared to be two opposing features of reality turn out, instead, to be two members of a kind: for the will to be free is not for it to be undetermined rather than determined. Rather, for the will to be free is for its content to be determined by the exercise of pure, unalloyed, a priori reason. In this vein, Kant asks,

What makes a good will good? It isn't what it brings about, its usefulness in achieving some intended end. Rather, good will is good because of how it wills—i.e. it is good in itself.

Unlike the kinds of normative judgments we might make about a good table, a good song, or a good plan, a will is not to be judged by its fitness to be instrumentalized in the pursuit of some other good thing. A good will is not a will that is especially good *for* some purpose that is external to the act of willing. A good will is a will that conforms with the very concept of a will—one might even say, it is a will in which the *appearance* of the will is in alignment with its *essence* as an activity of rational self-determination. This is the case when the will is determined only by reason and it fails to be the case when the will is determined instead by private interest, which tempts agents constantly to instrumentalize the will as a means toward private, egoistic ends.

Kant presents the Moral Law, to which the will ought to conform itself, in the form of a "Categorical Imperative." "Categorical" because it is a command that remains valid for rational, willing subjects irrespective of whatever other antecedent aims and preferences they might or might not have. It



is a law for the will that, Kant argues, follows from the very *concept* of a will. "The categorical imperative," Kant writes, "must abstract from every object thoroughly enough so that no object has any influence on the will; so that practical reason (the will), rather than catering to interests that are not its own, shows its commanding authority as supreme law-giving."<sup>25</sup>

Kant offers three separate formulations of this single Categorical Imperative. He first tells us that the Categorical Imperative is a command to "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."<sup>26</sup> In other words, when reasoning about what one ought to do, the Categorical Imperative prohibits one's engaging in practices that, if generalized, would undermine the social basis of the practice. He presents the example of promising, as a case in point. To ascertain whether it is morally permissible for one to knowingly promise in vain, one must consider whether it is coherent to will that everyone else do the same. But if vain promises became universally rampant, then everyone would also know not to put their faith in promises. The entire practice of making and accepting promises would collapse. By this, one comes to know that to knowingly make a promise in vain is to act in a way that is morally impermissible.

Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is that it is a command to "act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end."<sup>27</sup> It is important to clarify that this formulation of the Categorical Imperative does not actually bar one from treating a person as a means to an end; but it does bar one from treating any person, including oneself, in a way that instrumentalizes them, treating them with indifference toward their well-being. One must never treat any other person in a way that fails to recognize their humanity and their inherent worthiness of consideration as a being who matters. One may not sacrifice the well-being of another in the pursuit of some other aim. But more stringently, one also may not treat the improved well-being of another as some mere byproduct of another aim, as though it were merely some happy accident that the person affected happens to benefit. Any action that affects another human being must take up that human being's well-being as at least one of its explicit, direct, and intentional aims.

Kant then offers his third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which is "to act only so that the will could regard itself as giving universal law through its maxim."<sup>28</sup> He arrives at this formulation after a brief discussion

of what it is for a rational being to be in the “realm of ends.” To exist in the realm of ends is to be a thing that has value and worth in its own right and not in virtue of some further effect that it brings. For one to will in a way that is in alignment with existence in the realm of ends, one must will in a way that sees the very act of willing *itself* as its own end. This entails willing in a way that is not subordinated to the furtherance of one’s own private aims, but rather that is a will which could reasonably be had by all rational subjects in general, just in virtue of their being rational.

For Kant, the good will, so constituted as to be in conformity with the Moral Law, is the only thing that can be good without qualification. It then follows from this that the only proper object of moral judgment is the will. Concrete actions, in turn, are moral or immoral only insofar as the will that brings them about is either good or bad. As William James Booth writes in his 1997 essay “The Limits of Autonomy: Karl Marx’s Kant Critique,” this is a point of clear contrast between the two thinkers: “If Marx’s idea of autonomy is best seen in the image of man as tool-user, Kant’s core concept of autonomy must surely be expressed in the idea of the ‘morality of intention,’ of the good will.”<sup>29</sup>

The sharpest contrast to be made here is with consequentialist views which maintain that an act is good or bad in accordance with its desirable or undesirable effects. But this, of course, would invoke *a posteriori* reasoning about the world, not to mention make the agent responsible for the outcome of causal pathways that she cannot entirely control. Kant’s theory has the virtue of holding the agent responsible just for that which, on his view, she *can* control: her own spontaneous and rational free will.

I have presented Kant’s moral theory here in outline. It will be illuminated further by our discussion of Marx’s critiques of Kant, so let us turn to those now.

### Marx’s Rejection of Kantian Ethics

As we have seen, Marx is highly critical of the moral theories that were prominent within his time and philosophical milieu. Kantian ethics is no exception, with Marx mincing no words in his vehement rejection thereof. In *The German Ideology*, Marx diagnoses Kantian ethics as an ideological symptom of the late eighteenth-century German bourgeoisie’s incapacity to impose its will upon reality. By this, he meant specifically that it had failed to do what the

French bourgeoisie had accomplished in its country: it had not yet carried out its own bourgeois revolution in Germany. "Kant's good will," Marx wrote, "fully corresponds to the impotence, depression, and wretchedness of the German burghers, whose petty interests were never capable of developing into the common, national interests of a class."<sup>30</sup> The irony Marx points out here is that in the theretofore failure of the German bourgeoisie to coalesce itself politically and act as a class, it had instead Kant's ethical admonitions to at least *think* like a collective subject with a will capable of making the world in its image. What we see here from Marx is, at least in sketch, an ideology critique of Kantian morality.

Again, Booth's "Limits of Autonomy" is helpful here to highlight the issue:

The governing concept of autonomy that emerges from Kant's line of reasoning is one profoundly indifferent to the constraining impact of the world upon the will's causality. One reason for this we have already suggested: that given the particular, law-governed character of all phenomenal events (nature, human and inanimate), Kant's analysis is forced to search for the possibility of freedom in a domain that is not determined by the laws that rule space and time. What this means is that the world of the empirical agent must be put aside in order to disclose his or her true autonomy.<sup>31</sup>

Although Kant does not claim that his account is of a will free from *causation*, it is a will that is ungoverned by the same *type* of objective laws that govern objective reality. This on its own would seem to render it irreconcilable with Marx's materialist conception of history, which asserts the existence of general laws that govern all of human social life and its interaction with the natural world. However, this has not stemmed the tide of interpreters, from Eduard Bernstein in his 1909 work *Evolutionary Socialism*, to Philip J. Kain in his 1988 book *Marx and Ethics*, to more recent authors who have sought to find a home within Marxist theory for Kantian morality.<sup>32</sup> In this subsection, I will explain and assess Marx's critiques of Kantian morality, and discuss why a marriage of their two approaches has seemed appealing to some.

Some points in favor of the possibility of Kant-Marx synthesis are that Kant's conception of the good will is based in deriving what it is to be a *good* will from what Kant takes to be the essential character of a will. In this, it could conceivably be thought of as a kind of naturalist view sharing some key formal features in common with Marx's neo-Aristotelian view that human beings have a nature with conditions of flourishing that originate in and

belong to that nature. One could, therefore, think of Kant and Marx as, respectively, idealist and materialist mirror images of one another in this way.

Moreover, Kant's admonition not to treat humanity as a mere means to an end, but instead as an end in itself, is not so very dissimilar—at least not in form or rhetoric—from Marx's claim that "man is the highest being for man."

Still and all, Marx puts forward at least two powerful critiques of Kantian morality. The first is that because of Kantianism's focus on the autonomous "free will" and on that will's conformity with the Moral Law as the central question for morality, and because of Kantianism's indifference to the practical consequences of acting upon that will, Kantian morality fails as a guide for social transformation. In this sense, Marx sees it as a weakness of Kantianism, and conversely, a relative strength of historical materialism, that the former lacks usefulness as a practical guide by which to actually bring about the world that it invites moral agents to represent conceptually in the course of moral reasoning.

"Kant," Marx charges, "was satisfied with 'good will' alone, even if it remained entirely without result, and he transferred the *realisation* of this good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to *the world* beyond."<sup>33</sup> Kantian morality, then, is for Marx a prime example of what he refers to elsewhere as "impotence in action," accommodating itself to powerlessness over reality and retreating into the realm of the private, internal, and ideal.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, even regarding this autonomous "free will," Kant leaves wide open the gap between what "is" and what "ought" to be, arguing that the total conformity of individuals' wills with the Moral Law can only be realized in the "Realm of Ends," a condition that Kant argues cannot be realized in the material world. (We will return to this in the following chapter, which is about Marx's views regarding the "abolition of morality" once this gap is closed in the course of history.)

Marx's second argument against Kantian morality is that its focus on the free will belies the extent to which the will is itself determined by material conditions and material interests. The abstraction of the "free will" is illegitimate according to Marx because it attempts to prise apart the intellectual life of individuals from their economic, social, and historical context. A person with a will that is "wholly independent of foreign causes determining it," to adopt Kant's phrase, simply does not exist in reality, and therefore such a subject makes a rather poor starting point for moral theory. (Later, in 1853, Marx writes, there critiquing Hegel, "Is it not a delusion to substitute for the individual with his real motives, with multifarious social circumstances pressing

upon him, the abstraction of “free-will”—one among the many qualities of man for man himself!”)

This latter objection is also of a piece with Marx's critique of political liberalism, a critique that contains his second criticism of Kant's emphasis on the “free will.” Classical political liberalism justifies and explains the authority of the state by maintaining that it is based upon the free will of the individuals who are governed by it. The French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, for instance, states that “law is the expression of the general will.”

While drawing upon the French Revolution for inspiration, Kant, Marx argues, overlooked the fact that French republican ideas had their basis in specific economic and social conditions, and were developed by individuals whose wills were not “free” in the sense of being wholly undetermined by forces external to it, but rather were forged in specific historical circumstances and possessed content that changed in response to ongoing political developments. Marx writes,

The characteristic form which French liberalism, based on real class interests, assumed in Germany we find again in Kant. Neither he, nor the German middle class, whose whitewashing spokesman he was, noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeoisie had as their basis material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production. Kant, therefore, separated this theoretical expression from the interests which it expressed; he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into *pure* self-determinations of “*free will*,” of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological conceptual determinations and moral postulates.<sup>35</sup>

The state arises from factors that exist quite independently of anyone's will, and has its basis in the economic and social development of a given society at a certain time. As Marx writes, “The material life of individuals, which by no means depends merely on their “will,” . . . is the real basis of the state.”<sup>36</sup>

But as I have already stated above, although the rejection of Kantian morality very much permeates the whole of Marx's theory, he mentioned Kant by name and responded to him directly only rarely. To further explore the relationship between Marxist theory and Kantian morality, we will have to turn to Marx's later interlocutors in an ongoing debate about the possibility

of Marxist–Kantian synthesis. On that note, let us turn now to our discussion of Eduard Bernstein's reformist neo-Kantian socialism.

### **Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy's Embrace of Kant**

Among the earliest and most influential of Marx's interpreters is Eduard Bernstein, a leading figure in the German Social Democratic Party at the turn of the twentieth century. Among his notable impacts on the development of socialism was his theory of "evolutionary socialism," presented throughout his writings of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Bernstein's "evolutionary" socialism was a reformist program that eschewed revolutionary activity, favoring instead gradual reform guided by an ethical commitment to socialism.

Bernstein interpreted Marx as an economic determinist who saw communism as the necessary result of a crisis-ridden capitalist society doomed to collapse. However, Bernstein took the relative prosperity of German society at the end of the 1800s to be proof that capitalism would continue to expand, workers' living standards would continue to rise, and it would therefore be preferable for the working class to limit its political program to gradual reforms of capitalism, rather than to embrace a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. Over time, Bernstein reasoned, such gradual reforms could eventually add up to a communist society. But if communism was not inevitable, as Bernstein understood Marx to have assumed, then Bernstein believed it would have to be shown that it was a good moral choice. Since Bernstein understood Marx's theory to be deterministic, he argued that it did not have the resources for a moral philosophy on its own.<sup>37</sup> That moral philosophy would have to be lifted from somewhere—and Kantian morality might do.

We can already see that there are two important errors in Bernstein's argumentation. The first is that the fact of present economic expansion, taken by itself, by no means invalidates the thesis that capitalism is inherently crisis-ridden; Bernstein would not be alone in coming to realize this in the years following the 1899 publication of his *Evolutionary Socialism*. Secondly, Marx never subscribed to the crude economic determinism that Bernstein attributed to him. Although it is true that Marx thought crises were inevitable, he by no means committed himself theoretically to the view that communism was also inevitable.

In *Evolutionary Socialism*, we see how Bernstein's reading of Marx—a misreading, rather—set the stage for his reformism and embrace of Kantian ethics. Bernstein describes Marx's historical materialism in the following crudely deterministic terms:

The question of the correctness of the materialist interpretation of history is the question of the determining causes of historic necessity. To be a materialist means first of all to trace back all phenomena to the necessary movements of matter. These movements of matter are accomplished according to the materialist doctrine from beginning to end as a mechanical process, each individual process being the necessary result of preceding mechanical facts. Mechanical facts determine, in the last resort, all occurrences, even those which appear to be caused by ideas. It is, finally, always the movement of matter which determines the form of ideas and the directions of the will; and thus these also (and with them everything that happens in the world of humanity) are inevitable. The materialist is thus a Calvinist without God. If he does not believe in a predestination ordained by a divinity, yet he believes and must believe that starting from any chosen point of time all further events are, through the whole of existing matter and the directions of force in its parts, determined beforehand.

The application of materialism to the interpretation of history means then, first of all, belief in the inevitableness of all historical events and developments.<sup>38</sup>

In Chapter 5, I presented the notion of “dialectical compatibilism” to capture Marx's account of freedom and determinism as a historically developing dialectic, such that the relationship between freedom and determinism cannot be described in an ahistorically and universally valid manner. Freedom is a historically emerging product of human activity, guided by deterministic laws that weaken their hold as human beings' capacity to practically abolish the separation between humanity and nature develops in turn. Bernstein's misrepresentation of Marx's views regressively assimilates Marx's historical materialism to the earlier French materialism that Marx explicitly rejected.

As Pierre Broué recounts in his 1971 history of the German Revolution:

The first serious attack on the theoretical level against the Marxist foundations of the Erfurt Programme started in 1898, and originated



from within the leading nucleus of the [German Social Democratic] Party, from a friend of Engels, an organiser of the illegal press in the time of the Exceptional Laws. This was the "revisionism" of Eduard Bernstein. He based himself upon his observations of the preceding twenty years, during which capitalism had developed peacefully, and he questioned Marx's perspective that the contradictions of capitalism would sharpen. At the same time, he questioned the philosophical foundations of Marxism, dialectical materialism. Bernstein believed that socialism was no longer the dialectical solution of these contradictions, imposed by the conscious struggle of the working class. He now saw socialism as being the result of the free choice of people, independently of their economic and social conditioning, as a moral option instead of a social necessity. He counterposed to what he regarded as outdated revolutionary phraseology the realistic search for reforms, for which the working class should sink itself into a broad democratic movement with important sections of the bourgeoisie.<sup>39</sup>

Bernstein's critique of Marx, and embrace of Kantianism, sets a template that numerous scholars and activists have followed. The argument contains three key moves: the first is to strip Marx of dialectic and substitute, in its place, a strict, one-sided, mechanistic determinism; the second is to assert that because Marxism is so mechanistic, it is first of all obviously wrong about human social existence and second of all, unable to accommodate moral theory; the third is to deny Marx's purportedly mechanistic determinism in the case of human activity and assert, in its place, Kant's moral conception and theory of freedom.

Bernstein's evolutionary socialism sparked a debate between him and Karl Kautsky, also then a leader in the German Social Democratic Party. Kautsky's 1906 work *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* further develops a Marxist critique of Kantian morality, largely in the form of a rebuttal to Bernstein's argument that Marx's theory required Kantian supplementation.

The core of Kautsky's argument for the fundamental incompatibility of Kantian with Marxist philosophy is the following. In a communist society, treating human beings as ends would already be embedded in social practices developed through revolutionary activity bringing about the transition from capitalist to communist society. There would then be no need for human beings to bind themselves to a Moral Law which contradicted their



own interests and desires. The timelessness of the Moral Law is premised on the permanence of social contradictions that produce human solidarity as a merely ethical aspiration rather than as a concretely realized feature of lived experience. It presupposes metaethical commitments about the *ground* of morality that cannot be squared with Marxist philosophy's insistence that ethical problems and requirements emerge historically in the course of human practice and may eventually come to disappear within the same.

Kant argues that the Categorical Imperative is a universal and eternal maxim of reason. In this sense, Kautsky argues, Kant cannot account for the possibility of a future society struggled for on the basis of human solidarity. Kautsky writes,

[The] timeless moral law, that man ought to be an end, and at no time simply a means, has itself only an "end" in a society in which men are used by other men simply as means to their ends. In a communist society, this possibility disappears and with that goes the necessity of the Kantian Programme for the "entire future world history." What becomes then of this? We have then in the future either no Socialism, or no world history to expect.<sup>40</sup>

Following Marx, Kautsky argues that Kantian morality ignores the ways in which historical, economic, and social factors can play a role in determining human consciousness and in particular, the formation of their wills. It substitutes the autonomous free will for the concrete and worldly human being as a moral agent. On the other hand, Marx also argues that Kantian morality is too easily reconciled to powerlessness over reality, making morality out as purely a question of "the good will," which is good without reference to its effects.

Kautsky articulates a third point of difference between Marxist and Kantian morality: because Kant thinks it is a permanent feature of human life that human beings' interests and desires will conflict with the Moral Law, he does not see morality as a historical phenomenon that can pass away in the course of human social development. Kant instead defers the resolution of this contradiction to the "Realm of Ends," which cannot be realized except through God. We will return to this theme in Chapter 9, where we discuss Marx's views regarding the possibility of morality ceasing to apply to human life at all, once relations of solidarity and human flourishing are practically instantiated.

## Later Attempts to Reconcile Kantian Ethics and Marxist Theory

Since Bernstein, there have been more attempts to reconcile Kantian ethics with Marxist political philosophy. One notable example is Philip Kain's 1988 *Marx and Ethics*, where we find a more coherent and subtly argued Kant-Marx synthesis than was put forward by Bernstein. Kain draws our attention away from Kant's explicitly moral philosophical writings; with respect to these, he concedes the validity of the sorts of refutations raised by Kautsky. However, when it comes to the presupposition of a free, undetermined individual who is subject to a universally valid Moral Law, Kain argues,

these are not Kant's assumptions in his writings on politics and philosophy of history. In these texts things are not just left to the individual. Individual choice is not enough to produce morality. The historical development of culture and social institutions is a necessary presupposition for the possibility of morality—for acting in accordance with the categorical imperative. This is where we find the similarity between Marx and Kant. Marx is seeking a historical agent that will make possible the realization of morality and in doing so is influenced by what Kant has to say about this sort of agency.<sup>41</sup>

In Kain's attempted synthesis of Marx and Kant we can hear some echoes of the legacy of Austro-Marxism, for which Max Adler's 1925 volume *Kant und der Marxismus* formed a key element of its theoretical basis. Adler argued for a reformulation of Marxism on the basis of Kant's concept of the free will. In his book *Marxist Conception of the State*, Adler writes,

Through my critique one can see for the first time that the *Critique of Pure Reason* does indeed have a revolutionary meaning, inasmuch as the work was seminal for social science, and Kant can be seen as a terminal point of the old, and the beginning of a new, philosophy—the completion of the individualistic point of view and the founder of collective thought.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, Marx stands in a philosophical tradition with Kant or, at least, stands in close relation to that tradition and cannot be thoroughly understood except in conversation with it. About this, Kain is clearly right, just as Adler was. However, Kain's assessment of the relationship between Kant and

Marx is confused by his argument (influenced by Althusser's *For Marx*) that there is a sharp rift between Marx's writings before those published as his and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology* and Marx's writings after it.

Kain argues that Marx's earlier writings represent a synthesis of Aristotle and Kant. This synthesis, Kain writes, gives rise to a distinction between moral obligation *simpliciter* and "burdensome" moral obligation. For Marx before the *Critique of the German Ideology*, humans in communist society would have moral obligations, but they would not experience these obligations as burdensome, because the obligations accord with their natural inclinations. Kain writes,

Marx does, I think, have a theory of moral obligation, even though he does not put any emphasis on fulfilling burdensome obligations. This, I think, is because morality for Marx, at least in one respect, is not understood as it is for Christian morality or as for Kant, but much more as it was for Aristotle. . . . For Marx, as for Aristotle, the human being is exclusively natural and morality is the perfection of our nature. Virtue—the realization of our nature—is something we naturally seek. If our obligations appear as a burden, this is due to an opposition, or alienation, which has arisen within the natural social realm itself.<sup>43</sup>

But Kain then goes on to argue that "in the *German Ideology*, Marx's views on ethics begin to turn in a different direction." Kain continues, "His historical materialism . . . leaves no room for moral responsibility or moral obligation. Morality becomes ideology and it will disappear in communist society."<sup>44</sup>

This is so because Kain rightly sees Marx's historical materialism as rendering the free will of Kant's philosophy impossible. Kain's interpretation of Marx's later works hinges on a fundamentally Kantian assumption that any coherent account of ethics must presuppose a "free will," one that is not determined by anything external to it. Kain may have shown (I think, *did* show) that Marx's views on ethics cannot be assimilated to a Kantian frame, but this does not suffice to show that there is no ethical content in the historical materialism of Marx's later writings whatsoever. It would seem only still to suggest that what's there is more like Aristotle's virtue ethics than it is like Kant's Categorical Imperative.

More recently, a 2017 special issue of *Kantian Review* brought together scholars including Rainer Forst, Allen Wood, and Lea Ypi to reflect on the

philosophical relationships between Marx and Kant. S. M. Love's contribution to this volume, "Kant After Marx," echoes Bernstein when she writes,

If the revolution is not imminent as Marx predicted it would be, Marxism is left with a further problem: it is powerless to claim that we *should* bring the revolution about. Marx criticizes morality as ideology reinforcing the productive system of society. He attempts to make it clear that the claims of historical materialism are, as [G. A.] Cohen puts it, empirical and substantially value-free. History has shown that a transition to communist society was neither immanent nor inevitable. If we want social change to happen, we have to convince people that they should make it happen. Without the aid of morality, this will be a very difficult task.<sup>45</sup>

The main argumentative supports given for this fatalistic reading of Marx are Cohen's and Wood's strict-deterministic renderings of Marx's historical materialism. This account of Marx via Cohen and Wood follows an explanation of why serious engagement with Marx's theory is unlikely to find much value in the work of Marxist interpreters of Marx. The intellectual environment created by authors working in the Marxist tradition, Love warns, is too "ill-suited for growth." The key piece of evidence for this terminal ill-suitedness is Marxist theorists' purported tendency to "cling" to the view that communism is simply a fated historical inevitability, sure to take hold regardless of what actions human beings might or might not take along the way.

As we have seen in previous chapters of this book, this one-sided determinism does not follow from the materialist conception of history. That a communist outcome must be the self-conscious, purpose-driven, rationally guided result of organized and coordinated human activity, and that it depends, as Marx himself argued, on human beings making history but, alas, "not in circumstances of their own choosing" (so that the circumstances might well develop in such a way as to rule it out and bring common ruin in its stead), is a key tenet of Marx's theory. The premise that Marx presents a fatalistic determinism that cannot account for human agency and normativity is no more or less plausible than when Eduard Bernstein first proceeded from it in 1909. But this doesn't address the central pillar of Love's argument, which is that *without* the premise of communism as a strict deterministic outcome, Marx must appeal to the powers of moral suasion if communism is to appear as a potential outcome at all.

Setting aside the apparent separation between communism as an existing movement abolishing the current state of things, and communism as a result of conscious and agential human activity (a separation that doesn't exist in Marx's dialectically compatibilist account of freedom and determinism), there is the question of audience. The audience for Marx's ideas is made up of the world's working people—famously, it is the workers of the world whom he exhorts to “Unite!” The audience to whom the imperatives of communist thought are directed is made up of those who, as Marx puts it in his reply to Stirner's egoism, do not wish to make sacrifices for society but rather to place bourgeois society on the altar as a sacrifice they make to themselves.

Love writes that Marxism “is powerless to claim that we *should* bring the revolution about.”<sup>46</sup> But there is, for Marx, no need to “preach morality” to those who cannot free themselves except by furthering the aim of human emancipation. It is possible then to speak directly of those things that realize the emancipatory aims of the working class and are in its interest. Marx's political project *always* crucially depends upon the subjective, self-conscious aims of human beings; this is not something that was left out of his view, that Kantian morality must now be marshalled to supply. The “abolition of morality,” for Marx, comes in the form of the complete coincidence of the interests of the working class with the good of humanity. This is one of the many respects in which, on Marx's view, the condition of the working class under capitalism prefigures the universal condition of humanity in communism, such that wrongs committed against it are not merely particular, but universal wrongs.

Members of the capitalist class apprehend these imperatives as distinctly, ineluctably, and *merely* ethical in a way that allows Kantian ethics to seem common-sensical and eternal: from this perspective, if communism is what is necessary for the good of humanity, it is clear that it must entail some personal sacrifice that Marx seems unable to justify. But this is not a general, universal fact about the relation of the individual to society. It is a specific historical fact about the present-day relationship of capitalists to society.

Love's analysis is thus totally correct as a description of how those whose class interests run counter to the aims of Marxism are disposed to relate to its demands, if they are not part of that group of class traitors who defect from the bourgeoisie and recognize the proletariat as “the class with the future in its hands.” The notion of class, however, must be centered in order to make sense of Marx's claim that the communists do not preach morality as

such. This means, ironically, that Marxism resists Kantian attempts to “save” it by doubling down on good will. If moral suasion is ruled out as a revolutionary method, then we are left again with Marx’s insistence that *only* the working class, whose class interest coincides with the interests of humanity, is suited to lead the struggle for human emancipation. There is no “Plan B”; the failure of the working class to emancipate itself would spell destruction for humanity and the eradication of any hope for communism.

Here we have detailed Marx’s most important criticisms of Kantian morality and outlined Kantian ethics’ incompatibility with Marxism. Let us now turn to Marx’s critique of Utilitarianism.

### Marx on Utilitarianism

In the writings later published as *The Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx and Engels dismiss James Mill’s utilitarian moral philosophy as the “complete union of the theory of utility with political economy.”<sup>47</sup> While they make reference there to the thought of Baron d’Holbach, Helvetius, Jeremy Bentham, and James Mill, the bulk of their criticism is aimed specifically at Jeremy Bentham, with whom Mill worked closely.

In this section, I provide a brief critical reconstruction of Marx’s criticisms of utilitarian moral theory. A completely thorough treatment of Marx’s analysis of utilitarianism lies beyond the scope of the present work and I do not, for instance, evaluate each of the many forms of utilitarianism that have been developed in response to objections sometimes similar in spirit to those that Marx raises. After studying Marx’s criticisms of Bentham, we shall turn to his critique of John Stuart Mill. Marx’s views on the younger Mill are most fully developed in his later works such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Whereas Marx had little use for Bentham, he regarded J. S. Mill as a serious thinker whose careful presentation of liberal responses to social problems shed clarifying light upon the limitations of liberalism, precisely because J. S. Mill developed it with such care.

Marx’s criticisms of utilitarianism are twofold. He charges that utilitarianism is incapable of accommodating human individuality in all its concrete aspects, instead representing humans narrowly as sources or beneficiaries of utility. Secondly, Marx argues that utilitarianism functions in practice to justify the capitalist economic system that is itself the source of so much suffering it cannot alleviate.

## Marx and Bentham

Karl Marx issued blistering condemnations of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, rejecting it as "insipid" and dogmatic. Allen Wood, in his widely influential discussion of Marx, concludes that Marx's philosophical engagements with Bentham "exhibit even less substantive disagreement with Bentham's ['greatest happiness'] principle than comprehension of it."<sup>48</sup> Marx was not an incompetent theorist, so how can that be?

It isn't. Marx understood Bentham's utilitarianism better than most have, critiquing it cogently and substantively. But since Bentham's utilitarianism has fallen out of favor even among most utilitarians, one might well wonder whether vindicating Marx's critiques of him accomplishes anything more than to simply strike a dead horse a few more blows. Marx's engagement with Bentham is of historical interest, but as we will see, his critiques of Bentham also have important consequences for utilitarianism generally and for liberal moral theory more broadly as a whole. As such, they shed light on central debates in moral and political philosophy today. The dismissal of Marx's critiques of Bentham is part of a larger practice of neglecting or disparaging Marx's engagements with moral theory. Demonstrating the merits of Marx's critiques of Bentham's utilitarianism may encourage more open-minded approaches to understanding Marx's moral thought, a development that in my view would be salutary for contemporary moral philosophy.

According to Wood, "Marx's explicit statements about utilitarianism do not give us much to work with. They express contemptuous rejection of the doctrine, but give little evidence that Marx understands what he is rejecting."<sup>49</sup> Let us examine some of Marx's explicit statements about utilitarianism and consider whether this evaluation of them is fair.

One of Marx's most important critiques of Bentham's utilitarianism is that it is a conservative ideological justification for the status quo.<sup>50</sup> Whereas, Marx writes, utilitarianism had some egalitarian and revolutionary content in the works of Claude Adrien Helvetius and Baron d'Holbach, in Bentham's work it is "a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs, an attempt to prove that under existing conditions the mutual relations of people today are the most advantageous and generally useful."<sup>51</sup>

If Wood is right, then declarations of this sort betray a gross misunderstanding on Marx's behalf. And indeed, Marx's dismissal of Bentham as a "mere apologist" for the status quo will perhaps seem surprising to those familiar with Bentham's advocacy of progressive social causes. What's more,



Bentham's "Greatest Happiness" principle tells us that the most ethically desirable state of affairs is that which yields the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

It would be natural, then, to ask what prescriptions Bentham might have for societies with high levels of economic inequality, where the majority of the population scrapes by on very little and a small economic elite luxuriates in great excess. It seems at least arguably the case that in such a society, the maximization of utility would require the appropriation of wealth from the upper reaches of the social ladder, and its redistribution to improve, as much as possible, the lots of as many of society's members as possible. Indeed, it is likely the naturalness of this supposition that has given interpreters of Marx cause to wonder whether revolutionary socialism is not itself just a special version of utilitarianism.<sup>52</sup>

But consider Bentham's *Principles of the Civil Code*, published in 1843, only three years prior to the preparation of the writings that were later published as Marx's and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology*. Bentham not only fails to draw the socialistic conclusions one might imagine could follow from the Greatest Happiness Principle, but he positions himself as an impassioned defender of the inviolability of private property and, yes, the economic status quo. He issues an impassioned plea against the redistribution of wealth, insisting that socializing private property could only decrease the quantity of happiness in the aggregate. Speaking with respect to the seizure of real estate, Bentham writes,

The profit spread among the multitude divides itself into impalpable parts; the whole loss is felt by him who supports it alone. . . . Instead of one place suppressed, suppose a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand: the total disadvantage remains the same. The spoil taken from thousands of individuals must be divided among millions . . . The groans of sorrow and the cries of despair would resound on all sides: the shouts of joy, if there were any such, would not be the expression of happiness, but of the antipathy which rejoices in the misery of its victims.<sup>53</sup>

Bentham relies on some curious arithmetic to reach his conclusion that it is never permissible to violate the sanctity of private property. He argues that the subjective experience of property loss is so painful that no matter how great the wealth, its impact for those among whom it is distributed will necessarily be inconsequential compared to the individual's pain of losing it.



One might have thought that whether or not this were the case would depend entirely on the concrete facts of the matter—how much wealth? Distributed among how many? With what level of need?—and not the sort of thing one could simply pronounce *a priori*. But Bentham insists against this that it is always impossible to maximize happiness through encroachments on private property.

And if you were not keeping track, you might think “shouts of joy” emanating from the majority of human beings were as good a sign as any that happiness had been maximized. Bentham is on guard against such naive misconceptions. As he helpfully informs the reader, the joy of the masses does not count, because it is not real happiness, rather only the “barbarous,” grasping *schadenfreude* of the have-nots.

Bentham is not yet satisfied, however, that he has done quite enough to impress upon the masses the importance of leaving class society just as it is. “I cannot yet quit this subject,” he admits, “it appears so essential, for the establishment of the principle of security, to trace the error into all its retreats.” He continues:

Who, then, is the greatest egotist—he who desires to preserve what he has? or he who wishes to take, and even to seize by force, that which belongs to another? An injury felt, and a benefit not felt, such is the result of these fine operations in which the interest of individuals is sacrificed to that of the public.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever one might think about Bentham's stance on private property here, it would be hard to deny that Marx's critique of Bentham's utilitarianism as an “apologia for the existing state of affairs” is hardly unfounded. Wood's suggestion that Marx's criticism of Bentham is unintelligible except as a symptom of Marx's failure to understand Bentham is uncharitable, at best. Familiarity with Bentham's own stated views makes it no great secret why Marx would interpret him as he does.

In any case, these quotations from Bentham's work might all just be evidence that Bentham himself was a hypocrite. Perhaps they don't tell against Benthamite utilitarianism itself at all. But I don't think that is the case. I can only sketch here the kind of argument I think Marx might offer as further support for his claim that Bentham's Utilitarianism is “a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs.” The sketch is inspired by George Brenkert's observation that

the Utilitarian principle assumes a cleavage between the individual's interests and the general interests. It is for this reason one calculates individual utilities to find what is the greatest good. But it is just this cleavage that Marx condemns as characteristic of class society, and particularly bourgeois society. For man as man, as a species being, there is a harmony of personal and social interests because "he treats himself as the actual living species."<sup>55</sup>

Bentham's method in determining whether or not it would be permissible to appropriate a piece of private property is to quantitatively measure the pain caused to the erstwhile property-owner, as well as the pleasure brought thereby to the individual members of the public at large. And indeed, if his version of Utilitarianism is true, then this is precisely what he *should* do. But then, what matters in the end to the moral right- or wrong-ness of a particular state of affairs is something like the question "Just how badly do the people in power want to keep things the way that they are and how upset will they be if things are changed?" If the subjective discomfort of those in power is grave enough, then it turns out, just on this basis, that it is morally wrong to redistribute private wealth. A social question, of how resources necessary for the life and flourishing of the species ought to be allocated, is neatly converted into a conflict between individual and society. And act utilitarian calculations are based on the sum of calculable *individual* pleasure or suffering. Bentham is not merely hypocritically twisting hedonistic act utilitarianism to fit his arguments against the evils of wealth redistribution; he is correctly drawing the theory's natural conclusions.

Utilitarianism was first developed by Helvetius and Baron d'Holbach in something of a democratic spirit. By abstracting away from the particular person and focusing instead on utility, these authors could assert an equality among persons, since utility matters in whatever person you find it. As in the quote that James Mill attributed to Bentham, utilitarianism was the call for "everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one."<sup>56</sup> But that same version of utilitarian theory turns out to be profoundly undemocratic in practice.

If in *The German Ideology*, Marx is highly critical of Jeremy Bentham, then it would be fair to say that by the time it came around to the writing of *Capital*, Marx's opinion of Bentham had not improved. Marx's later criticisms of Bentham go beyond his critique of Benthamite utilitarianism which he put forward in *The German Ideology* and are here twofold: first, Bentham's

moral theory is justified by a “dogma” that social wealth is finite, and second, Bentham illegitimately universalizes and essentializes the existence of “the modern shopkeeper” as though it were obviously right to assume that what is useful to this type of person is also useful to other people in different economic positions and at all historical times.<sup>57</sup>

Marx diagnoses as “dogmatism” Bentham’s assumption that social productivity will remain at much the same level that it is now, or in any case, that it will not be possible to develop production so that it is possible to attain an abundance of products for human beings. The acceptance of this dogma gives rise then to the question of how to distribute social goods, *assuming scarcity*. Marx minces no words in his appraisal of this approach. He writes:

Classical economy always loved to conceive social capital as a fixed magnitude of a fixed degree of efficiency. But this prejudice was first established as a dogma by the arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham, that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century. . . . In the light of his dogma the commonest phenomena of the process of production, as, *e.g.*, its sudden expansions and contractions, nay, even accumulation itself, become perfectly inconceivable. The dogma was used by Bentham himself, as well as by Malthus, James Mill, MacCulloch, etc., for an apologetic purpose, and especially in order to represent one part of capital, namely, variable capital, or that part convertible into labour-power, as a fixed magnitude.<sup>58</sup>

This way of representing social wealth, Marx argues, leads to the notion that it is not possible to increase the portion of social wealth that is devoted to workers. Social production is conceived as fixed, when in fact it actually expands and contracts. Of course the relevant question is whether production can ever expand enough as to lead to an abundance of social wealth such that workers’ living standards can be improved. But this is exactly the point Marx wants to emphasize: that it is illegitimate to simply assume a negative answer to this question and then to go on to theorize on the basis of that negative answer. To do so, Marx charges, is to lapse into dogmatic repetition of an economic truism that has not been demonstrated. Marx continues:

The facts that lie at the bottom of this dogma are these: on the one hand, the labourer has no right to interfere in the division of social wealth into means of enjoyment for the non-labourer and means of production. On the other

hand, only in favourable and exceptional cases, has he the power to enlarge the so-called labour fund at the expense of the "revenue" of the wealthy.<sup>59</sup>

In arguing against the appropriation of private property for public use, Bentham seems to assume that it is not possible to increase production so that everyone has access to the resources they need to live rich and satisfying lives. This assumption allows him to cast any act of socializing private property as a misguided injury of the few, to no great benefit for the many. So Bentham writes that, "The profit spread among the multitude divides itself into impalpable parts; the whole loss is felt by him who supports it alone. The result of the operation is in no respect to enrich the party who gains, but to impoverish him who loses."<sup>60</sup> Bentham seems to assume that it is not possible to increase social wealth and that all that can be done is to distribute relatively finite wealth in different ways, in which case, Bentham argues, it can only seem arbitrary or cruel to diminish a few persons' utility and divide that utility up among a mass of people, each of whom will only benefit to a very limited extent as a result of it.<sup>61</sup>

For Marx, on the other hand, the socialization of wealth is not simply evaluated as an end in itself, which would simply be realized on the basis of existing production. Rather, it is conceived as one necessary part of a transition to an economic system in which production could be further advanced and a condition of abundance could be achieved, which would allow for a widespread, significant, and continuing improvement of living standards.

H. L. A. Hart, in his 1973 article "Bentham and the Demystification of the Law," succinctly and accurately describes the disagreement between Bentham and Marx on this question when he writes:

Bentham was a sober reformer who examined society with the eye of a business efficiency or cost-benefit expert on the grand scale, and condemned the society of his day for its inefficient failure to satisfy, in an economic or optimal way, the desires that characterise human beings as they are. He contemplated no radical change or development in human nature and, though he thought things would be immensely better, if laws were reformed on Benthamite lines, he envisaged no millennium and no utopia. There would always, he thought, be "oppositions of interest" and "painful labour, daily subjection, and a condition nearly allied to indigence will always be the lot of numbers." . . . Marx condemned the existing forms of society not for mere inefficiency, but because its economic system stunted and

distorted human beings and prevented the exploited masses, and indeed also their exploiters, from developing their distinctively human powers. This could be rectified, not by the mere spread of ideas or enlightened education or piecemeal reform, but only by a radical and, if necessary, violent transformation of the economic and social structure of society. But with that transformation complete there would be conditions under which all men could achieve their full development in a form of society where men were humanly related to each other. Such optimism about the aftermath of revolution contrasts with Bentham's sober warning that "it may be possible to diminish the influence of but not to destroy the sad and mischievous passions."<sup>62</sup>

The debate between Marx and Bentham turns in large part not only on their different approaches to economics, but also on their different conceptions of human nature. Bentham regards human nature as relatively fixed, and destined to remain not appreciably different from its appearance in capitalist society. Marx, on the other hand, argues that on the basis of a transformation in production and a revolutionary change in society, human nature could develop and flourish in ways that capitalist relations render impossible.

This leads us to a second criticism of Bentham. Marx agrees with Bentham that a coherent moral theory will be based on a sound conception of human nature. But Marx charges that Bentham pursues this project of theorizing human nature in a limited and myopic way. According to Marx, Bentham not only reduces a wide diversity of distinct human relations and modes of experience to one single relation of utility. He also relativizes utility to one particular narrowly circumscribed form of human existence, that of the petty bourgeois small business owner. Marx writes:

The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what *Helvétius* and other Frenchmen had said with *esprit* in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man.

Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future.<sup>63</sup>

Bentham, says Marx, mistakes one particular historical appearance for a human essence, wrongly taking the standard of the modern shopkeeper to be valid for all human beings, across all historical times, when in fact, whether or not a thing is useful depends on a whole host of contingent, historical factors which vary in each case.

Allen Wood, in his book *Karl Marx*, is strikingly disdainful toward Marx's critiques of Utilitarianism, but I'm not altogether convinced that Wood has brought those critiques clearly into view. He complains that "Marx's explicit statements about utilitarianism do not give us much to work with. They express contemptuous rejection of the doctrine, but give little evidence that Marx understands what he is rejecting."<sup>64</sup> Wood argues, for instance, that Marx is unfair to Jeremy Bentham when Marx writes that on Bentham's Utilitarianism, "the utility relation has quite a definite meaning, namely, that I derive benefit by doing harm to someone else."<sup>65</sup> But I'm not sure how else we are supposed to construe Bentham's comments when he likens the world of human beings to a receptacle that can hold only a limited amount of happiness:

Take from your 2000 and give to your 2001 all the happiness you find your 2000 in possession of: insert in the room of the happiness you have taken out, unhappiness in as large a quantity as the receptacle will contain: to the aggregate amount of the happiness possessed by the 4001 taken together will the result be net profit? On the contrary, the whole profit will have given place to loss. How so? Because so it is that such is the nature of the receptacle, the quantity of unhappiness it is capable of containing during any given portion of time is greater than the quantity of happiness.<sup>66</sup>

Bentham really does seem to treat the distribution of utility as a zero-sum or perhaps more accurately, a *negative*-sum game; this in turn serves as his rationale for eventually abandoning the principle of "the greatest happiness to the greatest number" and coming to regard it as hopelessly naïve. Bentham assumes that there is a definite limit to the amount of happiness that can be divided among members of a community and that benefit to one person is harm to another. Bentham's conception of utility distribution is the reason

that he argues that it is always morally wrong to appropriate the private property of the minority in order to distribute it among the majority—he argues that this can only amount to diminishing the happiness of the minority to an intolerable degree in order to achieve some almost unnoticeable increase of happiness to each member of the majority, so that the end result of such an operation is always an increase of unhappiness rather than of happiness. Such a view might well be worth rejecting out of hand, but as far as I can tell, it really is Bentham's considered view. If Wood has a reason for reading Bentham differently than this, he doesn't provide the argument for it or seem to address the fact that this is the view Marx has in mind. In any case, I think it is hardly accurate to say, as Wood does, that Marx's comments about Bentham "exhibit even less substantive disagreement with Bentham's principle than comprehension of it."<sup>67</sup> Marx appears to quite accurately describe Bentham's theory—more accurately than many of its expositors. Insofar as Bentham's utilitarianism relies on an assumption of perpetual scarcity and rules out any substantive redistribution of wealth as immoral, Marx's disagreement with Benthamite utilitarianism is, fair to say, at least not any less substantive than is Wood's criticism of Marx on this point.

### Marx and J. S. Mill

John Stuart Mill fares much better in Marx's opinion. Marx says of "men like John Stuart Mill" that "it would be very wrong to class them with the herd of vulgar economic apologists" like Bentham. However, there is still a problem. Marx writes:

J. St. Mill and many other political economists conceive the relations of production as natural, eternal laws, but regard relations of distribution as artificial, of historical origin, and subject to the control, etc., of human society.<sup>68</sup>

Marx criticizes J. S. Mill for taking the capitalist mode of production as the necessary economic basis for all future society, yet arguing for a new system of distribution on that economic basis. But, Marx argues, it is impossible to achieve a radical transformation in the distribution of goods without also revolutionizing the mode of production. In "Theories of Surplus Values," he writes,

Profit, a form of distribution, is here simultaneously a form of production, a condition of production, a necessary ingrediency of the process of production. How absurd it is, therefore, for John Stuart Mill and others to conceive bourgeois forms of production as absolute, but the bourgeois forms of distribution as historically relative, hence transitory. . . . The form of production is simply the form of distribution seen *sub alia specie*. The *differentia specifica*—and therefore also the specific limitation—which sets bounds to bourgeois distribution, enters into production itself, as a determining factor, which overlaps and dominates production. The fact that bourgeois production is compelled by its own immanent laws, on the one hand, to develop the productive forces as if production did not take place on a narrow restricted social foundation, while, on the other hand, it can develop these forces only within these narrow limits, is the deepest and most hidden cause of crises, of the crying contradictions within which bourgeois production is carried on and which, even at a cursory glance, reveal it as only a transitional, historical form.<sup>69</sup>

Marx's argument is that capitalist production is aimed at and based in the accumulation of profit, which is an aspect of distribution. The capitalist requires a store of accumulated labor in order to make an outlay for the costs of production, and therefore requires that he receive as much of what is produced as possible. Without this, a capitalist venture will be unable to survive amidst competition from other businesses. Capitalists must reap a profit and reinvest it into the production process in order to keep the business running. Production and distribution are therefore, on Marx's view, two aspects of a single process within capitalism, and so it is incoherent to suggest that distribution can be radically transformed upon the economic basis of capitalist production.

Moreover, Marx argues, it is wrong to suppose that the capitalist mode of production is somehow fixed, necessary, or eternal, and not merely "a transitional, historical form," to adopt his phrase. Capitalism constantly revolutionizes the forces of production and yet as Marx notes here and elsewhere, the relations of production restrict human progress and limit the extent to which those productive forces can be fully unleashed. The products of capitalism, as Marx writes, are not merely the commodities that are produced under it, but also these relations of production and the social relations they give rise to: "It is not just this single thing that is produced, the commodity, a commodity greater in value than the capital originally advanced—but also



capital and wage labour; or, the relation is reproduced and perpetuated.”<sup>70</sup> It is this contradiction between the (developing, expanding) forces of production and the (narrow, restricting) relations of production that Marx believes will lead to an eventual passing away of the capitalist mode of production. Marx quotes Mill in *Capital*, pointing out that

John Stuart Mill, in his “Principles of Political Economy,” says: “The really exhausting and the really repulsive labours instead of being better paid than others, are almost invariably paid the worst of all. . . . The more revolting the occupation, the more certain it is to receive the minimum of remuneration. . . . The hardships and the earnings, instead of being directly proportional, as in any just arrangements of society they would be, are generally in an inverse ratio to one another.”<sup>71</sup>

So we can see why Marx does not wish to group J. S. Mill together with the “vulgar economic apologists,” as Marx appreciates the fact that J. S. Mill argues that the existing distribution of goods under capitalism is unjust and ought to be abolished and replaced by a fairer system.<sup>72</sup> However, Marx also writes that “men like John Stuart Mill are to blame for the contradiction between their traditional economic dogmas and their modern tendencies.” Marx recognized J. S. Mill as a thinker who was genuinely concerned with improving society and increasing the living standards of the masses of people. Marx also certainly recognizes that J. S. Mill is far and away from the apologist and “leather-tongued oracle” that Marx took Bentham to be. His criticism of J. S. Mill’s utilitarianism is that without a fundamental change in the way production is organized, there can be no radical changes in distribution and therefore the ills which J. S. Mill quite rightly seeks to address can never be fully eradicated on the basis of capitalist production.

In *Marx and Mill: two views of social conflict and social harmony*, Graeme Duncan writes, describing Marx’s objections to J. S. Mill:

In a social order of the kind characteristically envisaged by liberals, the major liberal values could not be embodied or realised. Liberalism reflects and idealises, without transforming, the evil reality of capitalist society, which must be transformed if genuine individualism is to come into being. In its application to Mill, the charge is not hypocrisy, but that his vision of life, if it is assumed to have any relevance to the generality of the people,

would require much more far-reaching structural change, especially to the property and the class system, than those which he actually advocated.<sup>73</sup>

Marx's dispute with J. S. Mill, then, also touches upon broader issues about the differences between liberalism and Marx's communist theory and in particular on the central question of whether the realization of values such as individuality and freedom is possible upon the economic basis of capitalist production. Additionally, as we saw earlier in the section of this chapter on ideology, within bourgeois thought and among bourgeois thinkers there is still a wide range for different theories, viewpoints, and assessments of existing society. Marx recognizes this, distinguishing here between the "apologism" of Bentham and the sincere, if according to Marx, ultimately unrealizable progressivism of J. S. Mill.

G. A. Cohen argues that Marx overlooks the fact that J. S. Mill did suppose there might be some substantive changes in the way that production was organized, and therefore that Marx is unfair in charging J. S. Mill with seeing capitalist relations of production as fixed and permanent.<sup>74</sup> According to Cohen,

[J. S.] Mill foresees the demise of wage labour. . . . True, he is not looking beyond commodity production. He envisages the persistence of a market economy, with capitalist firms replaced by co-operative enterprises, not a thorough socialization of the means of production. But this is not because he commits any such fallacy as the one Marx exposed.<sup>75</sup>

But I don't think this defense is quite enough to rescue J. S. Mill's brand of utilitarianism from Marx's critique of it. Even on this argument, Mill leaves intact what Marx identifies as the essence of the capitalist system—commodity exchange. Marx has no shortage of arguments for why it is problematically utopian to propose that commodity exchange could be the economic basis for what Mill would recognize as more just relations of distribution. "Co-operative enterprises," producing and exchanging commodities within a market economy, it must be said, *are* capitalist firms, and if they are to survive at all, they must operate in ways that are determined by the same economic laws of competition and supply and demand that, as Marx devotes so much attention to arguing, have had and continue to have a destructive social effect which must be overcome. This is the point

of Marx's numerous critiques of the capitalist Robert Owen and the production of workers' co-operative enterprises as a way to be rid of the negative aspects of capitalism. It is not as though Marx were unaware that this was being proposed.<sup>76</sup> However, he is less than sanguine about the prospects because of cases like this one:

*Equitable Labour Exchange Bazaars or Offices* (the name is given in English in the German original) were founded by the workers' co-operative societies in various towns of England in 1832. This movement was headed by Robert Owen, who founded such a bazaar in London. The products of labour at these bazaars were exchanged for a kind of paper "money" issued as labour "tickets," a working hour being the unit. These bazaars were an attempt by the Utopians to organise exchange without money in the conditions of capitalist commodity production and soon proved to be a failure.<sup>77</sup>

Co-operative enterprises within a system of capitalist commodity production have been attempted, but they have remained small experiments and have not shown themselves to be likely candidates as roads to socialism. What J. S. Mill leaves fixed, even by Cohen's lights, are features of the capitalist mode of production that Marx argues must be abolished if a rational distribution of goods is to be achieved.

I hope to have demonstrated here that Marx is both aware of and sensitive to the existence of different strands of utilitarianism, which he takes to be of differing degrees of merit. I also believe that Marx's critiques of Bentham and of J. S. Mill show the ways in which Marx's turn to economic questions in his later works informs a continuing engagement with moral theory. Marx's approach, and I think this is particularly clear in the case of his critique of J. S. Mill, is to examine the economic assumptions made by such theories and investigate whether the theories' positive proposals are realistic, given the specific limits that a society's modes of production can place on the ability of human beings to organize that society in a rational and moral way. But this is not by any means to suggest that moral concerns have been crowded out entirely by some strict economic determinism. Rather, Marx seems to agree in certain key respects with J. S. Mill's moral vision of what type of society human beings should strive to build. The main bone of contention here concerns the means by which such a society is to be achieved and the conditions that must be realized in order to produce it.

## Marx and Malthus

Thomas Robert Malthus's 1798 volume *Essay on the Principle of Population* was written as a response to the view held by Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Godwin, and others that society and human beings were capable of considerable future progress toward a fully rational society. Godwin, one of Malthus's principal targets, opposed the idea of a fixed human nature, arguing that with a change in the structure of society, there could also be produced significant changes in human beings themselves.

Malthus aimed to show that such significant progress was impossible, taking aim at Enlightenment aspirations for a better and more rational society. Malthus claimed instead that the human population would grow exponentially and in doing so, put such strain on humanity's resources that overall, life would only become nastier, more brutish, and shorter. The situation could be ameliorated somewhat, Malthus offered, through abstinence from procreation, especially among the poor. Indeed, Malthus claimed that exponential population growth was produced by God so that human beings would be forced to learn such virtues as abstinence and restraint. According to him, it would always be the case that population growth would outstrip the resources available to satisfy the needs of society, and thus it was not possible to improve society by increasing production, since the population would always increase to catch up with and eventually outstrip it.

In "Wages," Marx targets Malthus's claim that world overpopulation is the cause of widespread poverty, as well as the promise of increased wages and marginally improved living conditions for the worker, if only the worker will limit his reproduction and cease to add to the "oversupply" of labor. Marx attacks what he refers to as the "utter stupidity, baseness and hypocrisy of this doctrine."<sup>78</sup> Malthusianism's advice to the worker is "stupid" because it is so totally impracticable. In fact, Malthus himself admits this and it constitutes part of the grounds for his pessimism about the possibility of greatly and permanently improving conditions for human beings.

Malthusianism is also hypocritical because the bourgeoisie cannot possibly desire for the working class to become smaller, since, as Marx writes:

Big industry constantly requires a reserve army of unemployed workers for times of overproduction. The main purpose of the bourgeois in relation to the worker is, of course, to have the commodity labour as cheaply

as possible, which is only possible when the supply of this commodity is as large as possible in relation to the demand for it, i.e., when the overpopulation is the greatest.<sup>79</sup>

Even if it were the case that unchecked population growth was the cause of poverty, it would be impossible to address this effectively in an economic system that relies precisely on there being many more workers than there are jobs. It could only be addressed by overthrowing that system, but of course, this is not what the bourgeois intends when he adopts Malthusianism as an explanation of social woes, neither is it what Malthus himself prescribed, preferring instead to lay the blame for this suffering at the feet of the poor and their failure to be more sparing in their procreation.

This leaves us with the question of why Marx finds Malthusianism to be “base.” Malthusianism is “base” because it places the moral blame for the worker’s miserable condition upon the worker himself. If only the worker exerted greater self-control, the Malthusian can think, he would not be in such a sorry condition. It gives the bourgeois a license to observe widespread privation not as a product of capitalist society which could potentially be done away with, but rather as the natural and necessary, if lamentable, condition of human beings. As Marx writes, Malthusianism

is the more welcome to the bourgeois as it silences his conscience, makes hard-heartedness into a moral duty and the consequences of society into the consequences of nature, and finally gives him the opportunity to watch the destruction of the proletariat by starvation as calmly as any other natural event without bestirring himself, and, on the other hand, to regard the misery of the proletariat as its own fault and to punish it. To be sure, the proletariat can restrain his natural instinct by reason, and so, by moral supervision, halt the law of nature in its injurious course of development.<sup>80</sup>

To relate this back to one of the main themes of this section, it is important to notice here that Marx is more than happy to reject a theory precisely on the basis that it merely serves to justify and uphold existing capitalist social arrangements which, in the light of how they needlessly damage or destroy a large section of humanity, are unjustifiable. The aim of Malthusianism as a doctrine is to lower expectations about what kind of society it is possible for human beings to achieve, and to thereby provide justification for the existing society with all of its faults. If the optimism of figures such as Rousseau and Corcorret represented some of the most progressive elements of bourgeois ideology, Malthusianism captures its conservative side that has reconciled

itself to the limits of capitalist production. As Nicholas Churchich writes in his 1994 book *Marxism and Morality*:

A movement of thought originating from Darwin's theory of evolution and inspired by writers like Malthus and Spencer gradually became a significant intellectual force destined to play a considerable role in the second half of the nineteenth century. This movement of thought was expressed in Social Darwinism which was essentially an attempt to justify the existing individualistic *laissez faire* and competitive system of class society. Both Marx and Engels reject the ideology of Social Darwinism. . . .

Social Darwinism, Marx contends, is characterised by the evils of unrestricted private enterprise. Instead of treating society as the organisational means by which men cooperate in the tasks of promoting their social and moral ends, Social Darwinists reduce it to the Hobbesian state of '*bellum omnium contra omnes*'.<sup>81</sup>

Marx's critique of Malthusianism is no mere historical sidenote. Rather, it provides us with an important source of insight into Marx's criticisms of bourgeois morality more generally. Marx's principal charge against Malthus is that he exonerates capitalist society in its role in producing human misery and closes the theoretical space for a systematic critique of capitalism by putting in its place a set of moral demands aimed at the poor and designed to blame them for their own suffering. This tactic is by no means the monopoly of Malthusianism, and in fact Marx criticizes Christian morality among other forms of morality for performing the same exculpatory task for bourgeois society. Also, Malthusianism is by no means a historical relic, and strong echoes of it can be heard today in the rhetoric of welfare reform, in certain corners of the environmentalist movement, and in other sectors across the political spectrum.

## Conclusion

Marx's critiques of rival ethical approaches are not mere historical curios but have real implications for present-day debates about the prospects for social democracy and liberal solutions to contemporary social ills. After all, if revolutionary organizing is not actually necessary to bring about a better world of freedom, social harmony, individual fulfillment, and human progress—an

aspirational vision that liberal political perspectives frequently share as their stated aim or at least, do not rule out as a potentially desirable outcome—then why not just spare everyone the trouble and vote it in, instead? All one would need, then, is the right ethical argument to persuade everyone, including those for whom considerations of private interest would move them to prevent such a better world from ever coming about. If the people are reasonable and the arguments are good, then it should be no trouble. Divert people away from the conflicts occasioned by competition for scarce resources; counsel them that they ought to set their self-interest aside and cease treating their fellow human beings as mere means with which to pursue their own private ends, even if this means going without. Keep the existing relations of capitalist production intact—they are there, anyway, creating an abundance of resources, the likes of which the world has never known before—and devise a system of ethical calculation to rationally determine who ought to receive what out of this great abundance. Remind the bosses that they ought to love their neighbor if they hope ever to receive their store in heaven.

The problem is that it is not so hard to construct a world of universal human fellowship in theory, but our work is cut out for us when it comes to the task of creating such fellowship in fact. Moral dictates might suffice for the spontaneous free wills that inhabit philosophers' theories, unencumbered by embodiment and material circumstance. But we as earthly, biological, material beings seek the promotion of our interests and the satisfaction of our needs. The system of capitalism is riven with conflicts, the most central and defining of these being the conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie. In the rare circumstance that an individual capitalist succeeds in recognizing himself as a human being rather than a boss, he becomes capable of recognizing the proletariat's interests as aligned with the interests of the species as a whole. But this is atypical. Moral appeals only go so far. They might inspire charity, but no loosening on the reins of power. Or in the words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

In seeking the overthrow of exploitative, oppressive, and alienating class relations, the proletariat carries the possibility of realizing those conditions in which human beings could truly relate to one another as ends in themselves and not as mere means to capital accumulation. But this cannot be achieved without a struggle, one in which capitalist classes will fight tooth and nail against the movement for human emancipation from class society's degradations.

Any ethical theory that would preach retreat and abstention from this struggle as a means to produce human emancipation, then, in practice also abandons emancipation as an end. This is the kernel of Marx's rejection of the ethical theories he critiques throughout his writings. It is not that there is no fact of the matter about what we ought to do, how we ought to live, and how we ought to treat one another. Rather it is that he is not content to sacrifice the project of creating real human freedom and a resolution to the conflict between private and public good, in order to maintain the ideal pretense that we've already got them now.



## 9

## “No Particular Wrong”

## The Abolition of Morality

Over the course of the preceding chapters, I have argued for the claim that Marx’s theory has an ethical content which remains consistent throughout his work, though deepened and elaborated over the course of his life. Marx’s materialism, his skepticism of bourgeois “justice,” his criticisms of particular existing moral doctrines, and his rejection of moral suasion as a primary means of transforming society do not license the claim that his was an “amoralist” theory.

And yet those who read him this way are not entirely without rationale for doing so. Marx does describe the “abolition” of morality as one of the welcome achievements of the communist movement. He further indicates that a fully developed communist society would be without moral reasoning, as such. Without a firm grasp of the *historicity* of Marxist theory, it is all too easy to conflate Marx’s predictions about what lies in the future with descriptions of the world at present. We are not yet living in the time of material abundance and full human realization envisioned by Marx and other communists. We cannot yet totally dispense with moral theory in the meanwhile. Morality is an attempt to theorize and close the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. Marxism is a theory that posits that the world can be *made* what it should be. But we are not there yet.

Therefore, it is both true that morality is valid, salient, and necessary in our current conditions, and that it will eventually lose this salience in a transition to fully developed communist society. If this claim seems odd, consider the person who announces that after careful moral analysis and contemplation, they have finally arrived at the conclusion that it would be wrong for them to harm an innocent stranger purely for their own private gratification. Compare them to another person to whom this desire, and the attendant moral question, simply never occurs. The fact that for the first person, it even comes up as a moral question at all, speaks unflatteringly to their character. In Marxist theory, this same comparison can be made on the level of the

species. Morality is a contingent historical ideological form that has come into existence at a definite point in history and will pass out of existence once certain historical conditions are met, if they are met.

Responding to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and writing within the German context, Marx argues that human emancipation can be achieved in only one way:

In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*.<sup>1</sup>

Marx's claim is that the proletariat is unique in the complete coincidence of its interests with the interests of humanity. Hence, the wrongs committed against it are not simply contrary to any specific or "particular" interests it might have as a class. Wrongs committed against the proletariat are wrongs against humanity, itself: "wrong generally." This is why, from its own class perspective, the proletariat need not preach morality as such, nor have morality preached to it. In pursuing its emancipation from the dehumanizing, exploiting, and alienating reach of capital, it concretely constitutes the practical resolution of the most pressing ethical problem of our time. In this sense, workers' revolutionary activity also presages the "abolition of morality" that Marx foresees as a consequence of any future transition to a fully developed communist society, with its resolution of the contradictions between private interest and public good, and its forging of those conditions within which we might concretize into practice, and dissolve as an ethical imperative, the treatment of every person as though they were an end in themselves.

In the present chapter, I begin with a discussion of Marx's highly critical stance toward "sacrifice." Marx's insistence on the coincidence of individual with social interest, a coincidence which he sees not as merely theoretical

but as already realized in workers’ struggle, will help set the stage for making sense of his theory’s implications regarding morality’s abolition.

## The End of Sacrifice

In writings both before and after those which make up his and Engels’s *Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx distinguishes between, on the one hand, rational assessments of how human needs can best be satisfied and, on the other, moralistic calls for self-sacrifice. One key aspect of this distinction is that the two approaches must rely on different modes of motivation. The scientific communism developed by Marx depends on a correct assessment of the real needs of existing persons and aims to show rationally how the needs of people can be satisfied through effective political action and revolutionary activity. The Utopianism he criticizes (in the Bauer brothers and others), however, relies upon mere moralism—emotional appeals designed to make up for the fact that Utopianism lacks the resources to have motivational force on a pragmatic basis.

As we saw in Chapter 2, critiques of moralism play a key role in Marx’s arguments against the “True Socialists.” These are Utopian socialists who, Marx charged, rely upon the pronouncement of moral edicts to make up for their lack of a concrete political program by means of which socialism could be realized. This distinction between scientific communism—a theory derived using the method of historical materialism—and Utopianism is brought to bear most clearly in a document that Marx wrote with Engels, known as the “Circular against Kriege.” This document critiques the rhetorical practices of Hermann Kriege, a socialist and editor of the New York-based, German-language newspaper, *Der Volks-Tribun*. Here, I will explain Marx’s and Engels’s criticisms of Kriege, and how these criticisms shed light upon Marx’s approach to morality.

*Der Volks-Tribun* was produced and distributed in New York with the aim of representing the principles of the Communist Correspondence Committee to communists in the United States. Under Kriege’s tenure as editor (or at least, so Marx charged), the editorial line of the journal began to deviate away from scientific communism and toward Utopianism and moralism, making irrational appeals to emotion in order to convince readers to take up the cause of communism. Finally, the editorial line of *Der Volks-Tribun* veered so sharply away from the principles of the organization it was

supposed to represent, that Marx and Engels introduced a set of resolutions to a meeting of the Correspondence Committee, denouncing Kriege for what they referred to as “fantastic emotionalism” put forward under the guise of communism. These resolutions constitute the aforementioned circular in question.

A particularly important piece of evidence in Marx's and Engels's case against Kriege is what they regard as the latter's enthusiastic promotion of self-sacrifice as a communist virtue.<sup>2</sup> Instead of arguing for the coincidence of working people's self-interest with the interest of humanity, Kriege posits a moral sacrifice of setting one's own interests aside for the good of “others” who will benefit from a transition to socialism. This notion of sacrifice, of setting one's own interests aside, is totally at odds with Marxism. Marxist theory argues that all human beings have an objective interest in the realization of a communist society and of human emancipation. Further, Marxism addresses itself to that part of society whose subjective interest in surviving under capitalism aligns it with the cause of human emancipation. Marx and Engels charged that Kriege, instead, argued for communism not as a practical answer to the problems facing human beings, but rather as a moral imperative to be realized out of a sense of one's duty to humanity. In doing so, Kriege does precisely what, as we saw in previous chapters, critics such as Max Stirner accused communism of doing. This moralism posits “the common good,” or “humanity,” as an abstraction that demands sacrifices from real, concrete, human individuals, expressing alienation in a different form, rather than serving to abolish it.

The argument becomes yet clearer when Marx and Engels strike their final blow against the “sacrificing” Kriege.<sup>3</sup> They criticize Kriege because he expects to be praised for sacrificing himself for the good of others, instead of seeing revolutionary activity as something that he carries out for his own benefit as well as that of others. Kriege writes to the readers of *Der Volks-Tribun*, “We have other things to do than worry about our *miserable selves*, we belong to mankind.” Marx replies:

With this shameful and nauseating grovelling before a “mankind” that is separate and distinct from the “self” and which is therefore a metaphysical and in his case even a religious fiction, with what is indeed the most utterly “miserable” slavish self-abasement, this religion ends up like any other. Such a doctrine, preaching the voluptuous pleasure of cringing and

self-contempt, is entirely suited to valiant—*monks*, but never to men of action, least of all in a time of struggle. It only remains for these valiant monks to castrate their “miserable selves” and thereby provide sufficient proof of their confidence in the ability of “mankind” to reproduce itself!—If Kriege has nothing better to offer than these sentimentalities in pitiful style, it would indeed be wiser for him to translate his “Père Lamennais” again and again in each issue of the *Volks-Tribun*.<sup>4</sup>

Marx and Engels accuse Kriege of misrepresenting communism as “a religion of love,” rather than presenting it as a science of human progress and development; to follow Kriege’s reasoning would be essentially to take up a religious attitude toward humanity as a new god rendered into pseudo-materialist terms.<sup>5</sup> We do not “belong to mankind,” to which we must constantly sacrifice our individual self-interest. One *should* be “worried about oneself”; it is in fact this concern with oneself and one’s own circumstances that can be linked together with an argument for rational social control over society’s resources. For those whose activity is the production and reproduction of society, there is no need for a moral leap across some perceived gap between individual self-interest and the general interest of society.

Marx and Engels are quite clear in separating their own theory from what they take to be Kriege’s moralistic grandstanding. The point of communism is not for people to stop “worrying about themselves.” Although Marx does not refer to “alienation” here, his comments here on sacrifice relate directly to the problem of alienation. To sacrifice oneself, after all, is to alienate oneself from oneself, to give oneself over to a being that is separate, for the satisfaction of aims that are considered more important than one’s own. Marx does not think human progress can be aided by human self-denial, but rather, by human seeking for satisfaction and fulfillment. So what Kriege presents is not communist practice, but rather, as Marx and Engels call it, “a religion of love,” an irrational and emotionalist call to self-alienation. Without a material link between self-interest and the general interest, Kriege retreats to an irrational appeal to emotion to make individuals do what is necessary for “society,” an entity whose interests are imagined to be opposed to their own.

Sacrifice appears in Marx’s work as an important theme as early as *The Holy Family* and shows up again in his polemic against Max Stirner, which makes up the bulk of what was later collected and posthumously published as *The Critique of The German Ideology*. There, Marx responds to Stirner’s

charge that communism is a so-called good cause, requiring human beings to sacrifice for a “greater good.” Marx argues that far from requiring individuals to engage in sacrifice or altruism, his theory of communism is based on the needs and interests of people; it seeks to develop, confirm, and realize human individuals, not to promote sacrifice and self-renunciation. As Marx writes, Stirner’s mistake in his critique of communism is in thinking that

the communists want to “make sacrifices” for “society,” when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves.<sup>6</sup>

As we saw also in our discussion of alienation (in Chapter 4 of this volume), Marx rejects sacrifice as a part of his communist theory. Therefore, Marx argues, Stirner is mistaken in his understanding of communism as a call to sacrifice and Hermann Kriege is mistaken in urging workers not to “worry about themselves.” Marx has no need to urge the proletariat on with romantic appeals to sacrifice because he proposes a course of action that is consonant with people’s interests, rather than at odds with them.

For Marx, unalienated human beings perform labor for one another not as a sacrifice but as an act of self-realization, in conditions of human emancipation, circumstances are arranged so that in satisfying the needs of others in society I am also directly satisfying my own needs. As Jan Kandiyali has pointed out, “This claim is philosophically distinctive. Philosophers before Marx emphasize self-realization (though they did not always use that term), but few saw meeting others’ needs as constitutive of it.”<sup>7</sup>

In Marx’s private letters, he sometimes does praise the “sacrifice” of members of the Paris Commune and of other revolutionary struggles.<sup>8</sup> And he is perfectly aware that revolutionaries often do their work at great personal cost to themselves. Nothing in his arguments against Kriege or the Utopian Socialists can be taken to imply that Marx is unaware of the courage and dedication of such people, or that he is somehow stinting in his praise of them. But in attacking Kriege’s “groveling,” “self-sacrifice,” and “religion of love,” Marx’s point is to thoroughly reject and distance himself from the moralism implicit in it. For Kriege, Marx argues, revolutionaries ought to act out of a sense of duty to the abstraction of “mankind,” before which they are “nothing.” This is anathema to Marx; it is not what he is praising in the revolutionaries who endure great risk and hardship to carry out their work.

## Meanings of Morality’s Abolition

It is in *The Communist Manifesto* that Marx most clearly articulates the notion of morality’s abolition, defending it in the course of a debate he imagines between himself and a bourgeois interlocutor.<sup>9</sup> That interlocutor charges that “communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.”<sup>10</sup> The accusation here is (at least) twofold. First, that communism treats as merely historical and contingent what ought to be regarded as eternal and necessary. And second, that communism unjustifiably rejects the inductive hypothesis that the future will be like the past and that, therefore, morality will persist into the future, much as it has existed in the past. Marx responds that indeed communism *does* abolish morality, just as its critics charge. As it is the fact of class exploitation that gives rise to morality, it is only fitting that morality should “vanish” with the “total disappearance of class antagonisms.”

Marx writes, representing the conversation between himself and the imagined bourgeois interlocutor:

“Undoubtedly,” it will be said, “religious, moral, philosophical and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change.”

“There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.”

What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.

The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.<sup>11</sup>



What does Marx mean here? One interpretive challenge for understanding Marx is presented by the heavy use of irony that is characteristic of his style throughout his written corpus. Brazilian Marxist and literary theorist, Ludovico Silva, writes in his 1971 book *Marx's Literary Style*, "Marx was a lifelong ideoclast, one of the fiercest and most fervent idea breakers of all time." Among Marx's most devastatingly "ideoclastic" weapons was his biting irony, perfectly calibrated to cut away the cloak around a thing and reveal it as its own dialectical opposite. The declaration that the realization of full human flourishing in the course of communist development would be coincident with the abolition of religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law will strike many as so apparently outlandish on its face that perhaps we ought to interpret this bold claim in a highly deflationary and ironic way. Yes, Marx said it, but he couldn't have really *meant* it, such a reading would maintain. Perhaps he intended some hidden, subtler, meaning that is drenched here in irony.

To prefer a weaker, less radical reading where it is available is an entirely reasonable principle of textual interpretation. In this case, however, we have Marx insisting as explicitly and directly as he can that he fully intends the "most radical" meaning. He does so precisely to push back against and rule out weaker ones. In keeping with the "ideoclastic" nature of Marx's critique, it behooves us to entertain interpretations that render "abolition" in the strongest possible terms, so long as to do so is compatible with Marx's other claims and with his theoretical system as a whole. And indeed, it does follow immediately from the claim that morality is a form of the social consciousness of class antagonisms, that the total resolution and abolition of these antagonisms would produce material circumstances in which the forms of consciousness uniquely corresponding to class society could finally, in Marx's words, "completely vanish."

Marx's statements in the *Manifesto* regarding the abolition of morality, et al. do not appear in a vacuum. Rather, they are the culmination of a series of irony-inflected replies to various bad-faith accusations made against communists. In each case, irony is deployed as a kind of negation of the negation, through which Marx responds to communism's accusers by insisting pugnaciously that yes, the communist movement does intend to destroy that thing which it is accused of seeking to destroy. The irony, however, is that the thing in question—individuality, freedom, family, morality—isn't what it is declared to be and is already negated by capitalism's own destructive



processes.<sup>12</sup> What communism seeks to abolish is the supposedly hallowed thing—private property, nation, etc.—as it actually exists, which is to say, as a decaying mockery of itself. The “destructive” role of communism in these examples is largely to dismantle illusion and pretension—to call a thing a thing, sweep aside the decay, and produce new social forms better suited to the real state of things. In each case, Marx proclaims that these features of class society must be done away with totally, not merely reformed and reconstituted.

As Peter Hudis writes in his 2015 essay “The Ethical Implications of Marx’s Concept of a Post-Capitalist Society,”

Marx’s normative objection to the phenomenon of inversion informs his view of a post-capitalist society. Since Marx locates the central problem of capitalism in the dominance of the subject by products and activity of its own making, a new society represents the inversion of this inversion insofar as it abolishes any condition in which such a situation prevails.<sup>13</sup>

Take for example Marx’s response to the charge that the communists wish to do away with countries and nationalities. It illuminates his statement that “in the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.”<sup>14</sup> I reproduce it here in full:

The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality.

The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.

National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.

The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.<sup>15</sup>

Marx's response to the allegation follows a structure that appears in numerous iterations throughout the "Proletarians and Communists" section of the *Manifesto*. First, he states the allegation. Next, he counters that communists are hardly needed to destroy the object in question, since from the point of view of labor, that thing is already demolished and dismantled by capitalism and does not truly exist. In other words, only from a bourgeois perspective might it seem that the working class would experience the loss of nation as a loss to itself. Workers cannot lose what capitalism has already deprived them of. What remains is not to reconstitute some form of bourgeois nationalism for the working class, but rather for workers to develop and embrace class solidarity with one another across national borders. Capitalism has initiated the dissolution of national antagonisms and now it is up to the international working class to finish the job.

Marx highlights the inherent irony of the bourgeoisie's feigned anxiety about what the "loss" of nation-states would mean for workers, when it is the capitalist system that has set into motion those processes which make it so that working people already have no country to claim. Insofar as nation-states function undemocratically—facilitating the suppression of working people's autonomy, self-activity, and struggle for emancipation—the much-vaunted benefits of "citizenship" are, for all intents and purposes, already practically absent for workers. For working people to truly "have" a nation to claim, they must have political representation within that nation. True democratic representation for working people can be achieved only through proletarian self-organization and self-activity, conducted independently of bourgeois control. In its essential role as an instrument of class repression, this is precisely what the bourgeois state is organized to prevent. For working people to bring about full democracy, they must look beyond their national borders, distinguish their interests from those of the bourgeois state, organize internationally, and be in active solidarity with the working people of all countries. Those conditions in which the proletariat of a country might "constitute itself as the nation" are also precisely those that would ring the death knell for "national differences and antagonisms" already weakened by the homogenizing and universalizing process of global capitalist exchange.

We have already seen, in Chapters 6 and 7, how Marx makes analogous rhetorical moves in response to his imagined interlocutor’s accusations that communists seek to destroy freedom and individuality. He writes,

In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.

In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.

And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at.<sup>16</sup>

Here, too, Marx deploys irony to present communism—the movement of workers’ struggle against capitalist exploitation and for their own emancipation—as the negation of the negation. What communism seeks to destroy, he explains, are *bourgeois* individuality, *bourgeois* independence, and *bourgeois* freedom which, for working people, each exist concretely as the very opposite of what they announce themselves to be in theory. *Human* individuality, independence, and freedom would be produced in their place, but only in the course of sweeping away their sham, bourgeois impostors.

One might here reason that Marx’s claims about the abolition of morality ought to be understood along similar lines: perhaps Marx does not mean that morality will be abolished *as such*, but rather only that *bourgeois* morality will be swept away and replaced with a new proletarian morality that would persist into fully developed communism, long after humans’ alienated condition had already been overcome.

That reading has immediate plausibility but misses a key distinction between concepts such as freedom and individuality on the one hand, and morality, religion, and law on the other. The former, Marx regards as constitutive features of unalienated human social Being. Throughout his writings both before and after the *Manifesto*, Marx speaks of freedom and individuality as aspects of human life that develop over the course of human history in trajectories that partially co-constitute the fully realized flourishing of human beings themselves. Morality et al., on the other hand, which he

and Engels describe as forms of ideology, also develop in ways that are determined by human history, but they belong specifically to a particular period within that history—the period within which human life is structured by domination, class conflict, and exploitation. Freedom and individuality in their human, rather than merely bourgeois form, are essential features of fully realized human nature. As such, while their bourgeois form will be abolished with the development of communism, they will nonetheless appear there in a *human* and unalienated form. Morality, by contrast, belongs to the “social consciousness” of a particular age—the age of class-based domination of some human beings over others, of external imperatives to which one is compelled to conform. The abolition of morality’s bourgeois form—the form in which its contradictions are most fully expressed and beyond which lies not only the abolition of bourgeois domination, but of all domination and, in domination’s place, the realization of true human emancipation—is therefore also morality’s abolition *in toto*. There is no unalienated form which the abstract theorization of, and obedient submission to, an external moral law can take for beings who exist within “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”<sup>17</sup>

As we saw in Chapter 8, even Kantian self-legislation counts, for Marx, as an external, alien command. This is in part because while Kant’s account describes moral agents who are free to bind themselves (or not) to a priori moral law as they will, that law remains something eternal, unchanging, and undetermined by human history. Human beings can choose whether or not to obey it, but in obeying it, they subordinate themselves to it; an aspect especially highlighted by Kant’s emphasis on the sacrificial character of morality and his insistence that human obedience to the moral law is all the more distinctively moral, the more it comes at a personal cost.

Consequentialist moral theories such as J. S. Mill’s utilitarianism do not fare very much better and, Marx argues, also constitute alienated ways of relating to the world and the things in it. Just as capitalist exchange dissolves the manifold differences among things into the single category of money as universal abstract value, so utilitarianism, for Marx, is symptomatic of our incapacity to see objects for what they are. We do not see the world-in-itself and still less, the world-for-us; but rather, the world-for-capital. Commodity exchange conditions our perception of the world so that we never see or know things as they are, instead appreciating them only in light of their usefulness for yielding some further abstract end. Instead of apprehending things in

their concrete fullness, we relate to them as so many interchangeable means to some abstract, empty form: money, in the one case, and utility, in the other.

Interpretive alternatives remain, however, for caching out fully what is meant by an “abolition of all morality instead of constituting it on a new basis.” Let us consider two immediately plausible accounts of what this phrase might mean for Marx. The first interpretation of this claim would be that there is no genuine fact of the matter about morality in a fully developed communist society. The second is that there *would* be genuine facts of the matter about morality in such a society, but that the members of society would not engage in distinctively moral reasoning to ascertain those facts.<sup>18</sup> Let us consider these alternatives in order.

The first alternative is the one that construes Marx’s prediction most radically and counterintuitively (but also, I think, most accurately). On this reading, for Marx, a fully developed communist society is a society without any fact of the matter at all about (what would be only so-called) moral requirements. For the members of fully developed communist society, prosocial ways of being are not obligations or claims made against them; they are simply their already fully inhabited and fully expressed ways of being. Human beings in such a society would be no more morally required to behave in prosocial ways than they are “morally required” to be primates. It is helpful here to think heuristically of morality as concerning a “gap” between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be.<sup>19</sup> No gap, no fact of the matter about what ought to be done to close the gap.

Consider again, in this context, Marx’s and Engels’s claim that

morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness . . . have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.<sup>20</sup>

To interpret the abolition of morality as a condition in which there is no fact of the matter about moral requirements at all best expresses historical materialist ideology critique. Morality is not some independent, abstract, external set of commandments handed down to humanity from the outside. It arises imminently from human conditions and forms of being. If the forms of

alienated, exploited social being that give rise to morality go away, then morality as such goes with them.

The second interpretive possibility I presented above is that to say that morality is “abolished” in fully developed communist society is simply to say that while there might be facts of the matter about what is morally right or wrong, the members of such a society wouldn’t engage in distinctively moral reasoning to arrive at those facts. Unlike the first alternative, there is no robust metaethical claim here about the standing or validity of moral claims as such. On the first alternative, no one in a fully developed communist society is, properly speaking, ever morally obligated. On the second alternative, the members of that future society might well be morally obligated to do all sorts of things. It is only that they do not represent those obligations to themselves in thought, and they do not *do* moral theory in order to ascertain moral obligations. They discharge their obligations because it is already embedded in their forms of life that they would do so. Unfortunately for this interpretation, it is ruled out by Marx’s vehement insistence that “morality [*die Moral*, in his German]” is not simply “constituted on a new basis,” but abolished altogether. In fully developed communism, there is no social form taking the shape of a command that human beings “follow,” even if only unwittingly.

A third possibility, sharing similarities with each of the first two, is that we should seek recourse in Hegel’s notion of *Sittlichkeit*, standardly translated into English as “ethical life.” For Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* denotes a rational, well-ordered society with inhabitants who inhabit their social roles comfortably and readily, feeling at home in them. In the place of abstract moral commands to do, out of duty, what one would perhaps rather not do, individuals in conditions of *Sittlichkeit* actively embrace the activities associated with their roles. The private will of each individual is then coincident and in harmony with the good of society as a universal and collective whole. If the aim of communism is to be understood as the realization of *Sittlichkeit*, then a fully developed communist society would be one made of people for whom morally correct behavior has become habitual and customary. Importantly, these are not moral automata; their easy and comfortable embrace of their roles is the free, active expression of their fully realized selves.

In her book *Hegel on Second Nature and Ethical Life*, Andreja Novakovic writes that Hegel is to be understood as arguing that in *Sittlichkeit*,

true conscience is no longer engaged in deriving objective content through its own resources or testing what is publicly recognized against the

measure of its subjective convictions. Its particular duties are prescribed by its specific position within the social order and it is committed to the requirements internal to its roles. So in an objectively rational social order the basic tension between social expectations and particular commitment is (for the most part) overcome, since I form my commitments within the context of institutional roles.<sup>21</sup>

Novakovic’s characterization elegantly expresses that human beings in conditions of ethical life are not passive, automatic beings; they are rational, free, and active individuals who subjectively embrace their role expectations precisely because these expectations emerge from social arrangements that are themselves rationally ordered. We can also be put in mind of Karen Ng’s observations about friendship in her book *Hegel’s Concept of Life*, where she writes:

The act of visiting your friend realizes good friendship, not because it is deduced from the practical syllogism, but because it is an act of self-determination, an act of self-determination that can only take place by reflecting the power of an objective universality or genus—in this case, the rational, ethical institution of friendship, which itself exists within the more encompassing objective universality of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).<sup>22</sup>

Yet crucially, to say that prosocial behavior is habitual among human beings for whom *Sittlichkeit* is realized as a fact of life is *not* to say that there will be no disagreement or conflict whatsoever. Molly Farneth illuminatingly presents this point in her book *Hegel’s Social Ethics*, arguing that *Sittlichkeit* is best understood as a condition in which differences are resolved through democratic deliberation among rational agents who relate to one another through “full-fledged, reciprocal recognition,” and for whom such mutual recognition and regard is not still an ideal to be aimed at, but an already realized fact about human social life.<sup>23</sup>

Communism as *Sittlichkeit* has significant immediate plausibility, especially given Marx’s philosophical indebtedness to Hegel. The rub is that a Marxist conception of fully developed communism simply cannot incorporate Hegel’s conception of stable social roles as part of unalienated human life; and yet the notion of such social roles grounds the very concept of *Sittlichkeit*. The notion that one would embrace a particular defined role (or even multiple roles) within a well-ordered society, inhabit it, and joyfully

organize one's activity in accordance with the remit associated with that role, is too much akin to what Marx seeks to reject in capitalism's system of divided labor, which he believes artificially limits and stultifies humans' capacity to relate to the world directly, immediately, creatively, and expansively.<sup>24</sup>

*The Critique of the German Ideology* features a famous and brief sketch of daily life in communist society, which serves to help illustrate this point:

As soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.<sup>25</sup>

Freedom, for Marx, is not the subjective embrace of stable and defined social roles, but a life unmediated and undetermined, as far as possible, by any such roles at all. One is then simply a human being (or, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, a "rich individual"), shaping and reshaping one's interactions with the world and constantly reforming one's connections to it, and to the other people in it, as a human being—which is to say, as a dynamic and endlessly changing being whose relationship to the world can never be exactly what it was the day or year before. It is spontaneity unleashed. There is no principle to refer to, not the abstract universal principles of normative moral theory, nor even the "principle" of the defined social role that determines appropriate action for the person who inhabits it. The "rich individual" of communist society apprehends everything freshly, as the unique and particular object, person, or situation that it is. If such an individual can be said to inhabit and embrace any social role, that is simply the endlessly expansive role of a "human," which is to say, of a being fully engaged in the activity of in-principle boundless and ongoing self-change.

How does one approach the world in a human way? Clues are to be found in Marx's discussions, throughout his work, of how capitalism frustrates sense-perception and our subjective representations of the external world.



Commodity exchange and universal saleability, as we noted earlier, have conditioned our relations to other human beings such that we perceive them not directly, not as they are, but in terms of their abstract “usefulness” to us. Ruth Groff illuminates this point in her essay “Aristotelian Marxism/Marxist Aristotelianism,” where she writes,

The contention from a Marxist perspective is that the principled disregard for the particular, at the level of thought, expresses, *at the level of thought*, the principled disregard for the particular that is the mark of exchange-value. . . . If Kantian pure practical reason expresses the abstraction of exchange-value, the instrumental reason of utilitarianism can be seen to express the fact that commodified goods are produced not for their own sake, but instead as means—means to an end unrelated to their use-values.<sup>26</sup>

A consideration of *Capital* underscores the correctness of Groff’s analysis. There, Marx writes,

The expansion of value, which is the objective basis or main-spring of the circulation M—C—M, becomes [the capitalist’s] subjective aim, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. Use-values must therefore never be looked upon as the real aim of the capitalist; neither must the profit on any single transaction. The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at.

The world of commodity exchange is structured such that, just as we approach labor as a mere means to biological subsistence—and not as the highest active expression of our species-nature as creative and “self-changing” beings—so do we approach one another as so many interchangeable means to the end of endless private accumulation. This disturbed relationship to our fellow human beings cannot be overcome through individual acts of willing our behavior to be in accordance with an abstract moral law that commands us to treat other people as ends in themselves. It requires a massive social transformation that abolishes those present conditions which incline us to regard everything and everyone as means to the limitless acquisition of, itself, empty and abstract value.

Marx, following Hegel, regards utilitarianism as a quite pure ethical expression of universal saleability and exchange. In the course of his arguments against Stirner, Marx writes,

The extent to which this theory of mutual exploitation, which Bentham expounded *ad nauseam*, could already at the beginning of the present century be regarded as a phase of the previous one is shown by Hegel in his *Phänomenologie*. See there the chapter “The Struggle of Enlightenment with Superstition,” where the theory of usefulness is depicted as the final result of enlightenment. The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation.<sup>27</sup>

In this critique of capital's tendency to flatten distinctions and obscure our perception of things, relationships, and people, Marx echoes earlier remarks, from his 1844 manuscripts, about vision, sense-perception generally, and epistemic access to the external world. In his “Private Property and Labor” manuscript, for example, Marx writes that “private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunken, worn, inhabited, etc.—in short, when it is *used* by us.”<sup>28</sup> He goes on:

Although private property itself again conceives all these direct realisations of possession only as means of life, and the life which they serve as means is the life of private property—labour and conversion into capital.

In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world. . . .

The abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. The senses have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective

human relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need or enjoyment has consequently lost its egotistical nature, and nature has lost its mere utility by use becoming human use.<sup>29</sup>

It would perhaps be tempting to gloss over Marx's references to organs of sense-perception, were it not for its connection to several themes that permeate his work and, most notably, to what we know about the keen interest Marx took early on in a study of Aristotle's *De Anima*, with its reflections on sense-perception, the nature of the soul, and the relationship between form and matter. As Scott Meikle notes in his book *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, “Marx made the first German translation with commentary of *De Anima*,” apparently with the initial intent of preparing this translation for publication.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most-discussed passage in *De Anima* has to do with the relationships between form and matter, and between potentiality and actuality, in constituting the activity of sense-perception. Aristotle writes,

It is necessary to grasp, concerning the whole of perception generally, that perception [*aisthêsis*] is what is capable of receiving perceptible forms without the matter, as wax receives the seal of a signet ring without the iron or gold. It acquires the golden or the metallic seal, but not insofar as it is gold or metal. In a similar way, perception is also in each case affected by what has the colour or taste or sound, but not insofar as each of these is said to be something, but rather insofar as each is of a certain quality, and corresponding to its proportion.

The primary sense organ is that in which this sort of potentiality resides. The sense organ and this potentiality are, then, the same though their being is different.<sup>31</sup>

A long-standing interpretive puzzle about how to understand Aristotle's *De Anima* centers on Aristotle's physiology of sense-perception which has appeared, at least on its face, implausible to numerous of his commentators. In a famous line from the text, Aristotle writes that ensouled beings have a perceptive faculty which is initially unlike the object of perception but that, “on being affected it becomes like what has acted on it.”<sup>32</sup> He goes on later in the text to say, “Perception is being affected in a certain way. Thus the active thing makes that which is potentially like it like it in actuality.”<sup>33</sup> This view appears to account for sense-perception as a consequence of the organ of

perception being affected by the object of perception in a manner that alters the sense-organ, making it like that which it senses so that in some sense, an eye literally *becomes* blue when in the presence of a blue object; it would then be this transformation of the eye from potentially blue, to actually blue, that counts as perceiving blueness with the organ of sight.

This is, needless to say, deeply puzzling. In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel made sense of it in the following way. He argued that it would be mistaken to think simply that the form of “blueness,” as an active principle, affects the material eye, which remains passive in the act of perception. Instead, he argued, one ought to think of the sense-organ as becoming like its object in the sense that the seeming separation between them is overcome so that there is not a passive, material subject on the one side and an active, ideal object on the other. Rather, “Sense-perception, as made like to itself, has, while appearing to be brought to pass by means of an influence working on it, brought to pass the identity of itself and its object.”<sup>34</sup> Hegel continues:

After the perceptive faculty has received the impression, it abrogates the passivity, and remains thenceforth free from it. The soul therefore changes the form of the external body into its own, and is identical with an abstract quality such as this, for the sole reason that it itself is this universal form. . . . Sense-perception is simply the abrogation of this separation [between subject and object], it is that form of identity which abstracts from subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>35</sup>

Our aim here is not to wade into the broader debate about how to understand *De Anima*. What is relevant for us is the relationship suggested in *De Anima*, with which Marx was deeply familiar, between epistemic access to the world and the interactive metaphysical oneness of a perceiving subject with the world as its object. Hegel challenged readings of Aristotle on which sense-perception was a question of active form and passive, inert matter, presenting in their stead a picture on which the activity of form produces activity in matter, so that the sense-organ is “like” its object and the body is “like” its soul in the sense that they are unified in an interactive process—one in which each acts upon, and is acted upon by, the other.

Hegel's dialectical idealist rendering of *De Anima*'s account of sense-perception emphasized the active role of matter, yet gave pride of causal place to form, the *idea*. Marx—never one to leave Hegel standing on his head

when he could set him on his feet—incorporated into his own epistemology this notion of a mutual interaction between subject and object that forges an identity between them, rendering the objective, external world truly knowable to the human mind. For Marx, however, the dialectical interaction between mind and world that produces this happy outcome is precipitated not by abstract, universal forms acting upon human senses, themselves in attitudes of what would be initially passive contemplation.<sup>36</sup> Rather, it is an outcome produced by labor—human social activity directed toward satisfying one’s needs through material interaction with the world outside oneself. Through this process, we humanize the world *and ourselves*, forging a unity between the two that both makes the world sensible and awakens our senses to the world.

While the few commentators who remark upon Marx’s engagements with *De Anima* mostly do so to underscore Marx’s neo-Aristotelian essentialism generally, in his “*Poiësis, Praxis, Aisthesis*,” Henry Pickford gives sustained attention to what we might learn about Marx’s views on sense-perception by reading them alongside Aristotle’s discussion of sense-perception in *De Anima*. Articulating what he casts as a [Walter] Benjaminian model of Marxist aesthetics, Pickford writes:

If virtuous action presupposes phronetic perception of the moral salience of a particular situation in its particularity, then virtuous practical-political action too requires such phronetic perception, and this . . . model of Marxist *aisthêsis* is intended to cultivate the exercise and improvement of such perceptual capacities.<sup>37</sup>

The suggestion here is that Marx’s conception of revolutionary activity is as a practice that transforms and refines the human faculty of perception (*aisthêsis*), allowing the normative dimensions of human social life to be apprehended more immediately and, as a result, responded to both more spontaneously and more appropriately.<sup>38</sup>

Let us return to the passage from “Private Property and Labor” which we addressed earlier. There, Marx writes that to overcome the institution of private property is also to bring about the “emancipation of all human senses.” He continues:

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty

of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. . . . The dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense. Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's *sense human*, as well as to create the *human sense* corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.<sup>39</sup>

Marx's interest in ways of seeing, and their implications for our epistemic access to the world as it is, appears in his early writings and persists into his later work. In *Capital*, these themes are central in Marx's presentation of the concept of "commodity fetishism," a phenomenon in which things appear endowed with agency and independence that they do not have. Marx writes,

It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood.<sup>40</sup>

Marx makes rather quick work here of discussing the relationships among form, matter, and function. What he takes to be the interesting problem is not that matter can take this form or that, but rather, that *qua* commodity, the object enters into relationships that are utterly indifferent to the thing as it is: indifferent to its form, material, or function. Marx continues,

The products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different

with commodities. There, the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.<sup>41</sup>

The infinitely myriad forms in which matter appears—all of the forms in which matter can be *made* to appear through the exercise of human labor—are elided in a single form that predominates in capitalist society and submerges all specificity and difference: the commodity-form. Because the activity of human labor is organized privately as the work of competing individuals or businesses and corporations, only the products of labor seem to interact and to express universality, and then, only when taken to market. Never mind that their universality—expressed as a universal exchangeability indifferent to their specific qualities—is only a kind of shadow of the universality of labor as essential human activity, expressed in definite moments, circumstances, and ways. Marx writes,

Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community . . . The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.<sup>42</sup>

In such a society, human beings would recognize their products as the outcome of their own practical activity; activity which could be regulated, redirected, and organized in conscious collaboration among all the members of society.

There is a temptation, here, that I will warn against. It is particularly seductive for those who approach Marxism from a mainly philosophical or otherwise theoretical angle. Metaphors of seeing, sense, and recognition—while true to Marx’s conceptual schema—can easily incline one toward an *idealist* rendering of Marx’s approach to morality. Perhaps, one might think, we can “see” right now, today, what specific sorts of action would be called for in a future communist society. If only we can rationally deduce the right communist principle, maybe theory can fit us today with the eyes of tomorrow.

This is, of course, exactly what Marx denies. He concludes the passage above by reminding his reader that the conditions under which society can “strip off its mystical veil” obtain only with the emergence of “a certain material ground-work or set of conditions of existence which in their turn are the spontaneous product of a long and painful process of development.”<sup>43</sup> We might be reminded again of Marx’s and Engels’s earlier insistence that “for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution.”<sup>44</sup> The only way to “create an appropriate human sense for the whole of the wealth of humanity and of nature” is to overcome the alienation of capitalist production and to successfully, and for the first time, usher in a self-conscious and truly human history. Philosophical problems can be represented abstractly in thought, but they cannot be solved there.

Should we then say that Marx’s theory is itself totally without moral content or relevance because it presages a world without appeal to moral principle, as such? No. Such a world is not yet our world. Here, there remains much work to be done in order to do away with the alienation and economic exploitation that stifle human flourishing and solidarity. We cannot “think” ourselves into a form of consciousness that emerges only on the basis of social relations that do not yet exist.

We can, however, align ourselves with working people’s struggles for freedom and human survival, today. Workers’ struggles to resist and overthrow capitalist domination contain the germ of human emancipation. Thus, from the standpoint of workers under capitalism, morality is not an abstraction separate from class interest.<sup>45</sup> It both exists as an external command for the ruling classes, whose class interest disinclines them to follow it, and is already abolished as an external, alien command for those whose position is such that they cannot free themselves without freeing all of humanity, as well. This is an inner contradiction of capitalist society that can be resolved only once the highest moral imperative for human beings today is achieved: to secure the victory of working people over capital.

### **Progress and Perfectibility**

Morality implies human imperfection. We engage in abstract moral reasoning largely because if we don’t, we are more likely than not to get things wrong about how we ought to treat one another. One tradition of moral



thought asks us to imagine human beings better than ourselves and to act as they would. Thus, for Aristotle, the figure of the *phronimos* is a practically wise being, one who acts well because they have been well brought up. Immanuel Kant proposes a similar thought experiment as a resource for moral guidance: we ask ourselves, what would we do if we lived in a “Realm of Ends,” a condition in which everyone acted according to universal laws that they can will to others as maxims? We imagine creatures better than ourselves and seek to emulate them. But what if we could make ourselves into those better creatures? They do not imagine better selves and seek to emulate those in an infinite regress of moral imagination. They simply act in prosocial ways, as it is in their nature to do. They apprehend the objective world and act appropriately within it. As the early Marx might have put it, and the mature Marx would have agreed, “The senses . . . become theoreticians in their immediate praxis.”

What makes Marx’s approach importantly distinct is not that he thinks morality has validity only for those conditions in which there is no mutual recognition of one another’s humanity and in which the world is not already arranged in a manner conducive to the universal satisfaction of human needs. This, he has in common with other moral theorists before and after him.<sup>46</sup> What makes Marx’s view distinct is the claim that such conditions need not be a mere hypothetical dream. They are features of a world that can be achieved.

Marx’s perfectionism is perhaps one of the most easily misunderstood aspects of his theory; it is, for example, what leads some to caricature his Hegelianism, suggesting that communism represents a kind of proletarian-inflected “end of history.” It’s not even clear that the “end of history” implies stasis of the sort often attributed to Hegel. But as far as understanding Marx, such caricatures overlook that far from announcing the end of history, Marx’s theory heralds the possibility for a truly human history of conscious, open-ended, creative transformation to begin. This is what is meant when Marx says of bourgeois society, “The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.”<sup>47</sup> The human nature Marx would see perfected is labor itself—an inherently dynamic and ever-developing process of creation and self-changing.<sup>48</sup> There is no sense in which Marx can be understood as imagining that communism would bring human history to a close.

Critics who wonder whether the kinds of naturalized and habitual forms of prosocial human behavior Marx imagines for communist society could

ever take place are quite right to point out that a human being is neither an angel nor a saint, nor could she be. But Marx's theory requires neither that she be nor that she become so. A human being is a natural being who, through socially mediated activity, is capable of intervening into her own nature so that it is her own product. Through the activity of labor, she can practically relate to her nature not as a fixed, given, and alien object but as her own concretized subjectivity. And this is made fully possible only through a process that brings about the social production of the human species as its own object on a grand scale, one with a shared intersubjectivity that creates the possibility of universal and objective consciousness about the natural and social world within which human beings intervene.

Marx holds out the possibility that when human beings alter their society to do away with the exploitation and degradation of human beings, they will also effect an alteration so profound that it will make prosocial forms of human interaction habitual, customary, and natural. If that is so, then it is not quite so puzzling why he would accept the charge that communism abolishes morality.

Such a world would be one in which universal human solidarity would be "no mere phrase" with us, "but a fact of life."<sup>49</sup> This in no way entails an end to obstacles, to divergent opinion, to all suffering, or to negotiation among various and conflicting individual perspectives. It does herald a world of people for whom the injunction to treat their fellow human beings as though they are ends in themselves is no more or less necessary than enjoining one's heart to beat.

# 10

## Conclusion

The way out of the crises produced by capitalism is not backward to a simpler time, and so Marx is to be distinguished from romantic anti-capitalists who recognize only the negative consequences of capitalism. Marx theorizes the ways in which capitalism has *both* produced the conditions in which it is possible to see clearly that the highest aim for human beings is the “greatest possible development” of their “varied aptitudes” *and* made it possible to produce a society in which such a full and free development of human potential would be realized. The first volume of *Capital* features an explanation of capitalism’s revolutionary and reactionary aspects in this regard, which is worth citing here in full:

If, on the one hand, variation of work at present imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law, and with the blindly destructive action of a natural law that meets with resistance at all points, modern industry, on the other hand, through its catastrophes imposes the necessity of recognising, as a fundamental law of production, variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes. It becomes a question of life and death for society to adapt the mode of production to the normal functioning of this law. Modern industry, indeed, compels society, under penalty of death, to replace the detail-worker of to-day, grappled by lifelong repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers.<sup>1</sup>

Under capitalism, “variation of work” tends to take the form of, on the one hand, the constant threat workers face of being thrown out of their current employment and forced to scramble for new work, or on the other hand, the drudgery and monotony of performing just one sort of task for the whole

of their lives (while innumerable other workers are doing the same with regard to innumerable other tasks), so that labor in the case of each individual person takes on the character of a stultifying narrowness. Yet capitalism also makes human production, on a social scale, ever more varied, more dynamic, and more complex. What remains to be achieved, Marx argues, is for this variation, dynamism, and complexity to be made into features of the lives of individual persons and not merely of the society taken as a whole. This is a transformation that can only be achieved as a result of the revolutionary and modernizing processes of capitalism itself, and through the conscious, rational, and social intervention of human beings into those processes so that they become fully realized as human powers rather than powers over human beings.

At the same time that Marx identifies tendencies within capitalism that tend toward the socialization of production and the development of "rich individuals," he is by no means committed to any fatalism about the realization of socialism or of fully developed communism. Such an achievement will be the work of individuals cooperating consciously and socially to realize and exercise their historical agency. However, it would be wrong to think that because Marx is not a strict determinist, the field is open for voluntarism and moralism, or that whether or not communism will be achieved depends entirely on the presence and number of noble revolutionaries who, *purely* out of some personal sense of virtue and moral law, produce a new society at great cost to themselves. Communism may not be the only possible outcome, but Marx argues that when capitalism's crises become too significant for it to go on as a mode of production, the range of choices becomes strictly delimited. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, they boil down to "socialism or barbarism" or as Marx puts it here, life or death.

As in his earlier works, here in writings such as those which make up the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx's conception of human individuals is a central focus in his worldview, along with his conviction that the development of human capacities and of "rich individuality" is the highest aim for human beings. He continues to base his criticisms of capitalism and his arguments for communism on the relative potentials of these two economic systems to allow for the exercise and expansion of human powers. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that if achieved, communism would allow for the

free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time in order to posit surplus labour, but in general the reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, to which then

corresponds the artistic, scientific, etc., development of individuals, made possible by the time thus set free and the means produced for all of them.<sup>2</sup>

Marx returns to this theme in the first volume of *Capital*, where he again addresses the way capitalism has developed the potential for individual human development to a historically unprecedented level—a potential that can only be realized with a transition to socialist relations of production:

The intensity and productiveness of labour being given, the time which society is bound to devote to material production is shorter, and as a consequence, the time at its disposal for the free development, intellectual and social, of the individual is greater, in proportion as the work is more and more evenly divided among all the able-bodied members of society, and as a particular class is more and more deprived of the power to shift the natural burden of labour from its own shoulders to those of another layer of society. In this direction, the shortening of the working day finds at last a limit in the generalisation of labour. In capitalist society spare time is acquired for one class by converting the whole life-time of the masses into labour time.<sup>3</sup>

Capitalism has reduced socially necessary labor time to a minimum, but paradoxically, the more efficiently that reduction is accomplished, the more that dead labor rules over living labor, with stored-up surplus labor strengthening the hand of the capitalist against the worker. And as he writes in the third volume of *Capital*, capitalist production squanders human lives, or living-labour, and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain. Indeed, it is only by dint of the most extravagant waste of individual development that the development of the human race is at all safeguarded and maintained in the epoch of history immediately preceding the conscious reorganisation of society.<sup>4</sup>

And with that “conscious reorganisation of society,” Marx argues, the reduction of socially necessary labor would be a source of freedom for human beings. They would have more of their time available to them for pursuits beyond the mere struggle for survival; they would be able to exercise, develop, and expand their powers and develop as “rich individuals.”

Marx argues for a transition to a new type of society in which human beings would develop as “rich individuals” who realize themselves in the external world through their conscious activity. Such a transition would, he writes, involve the achievement on the part of human beings of a better

and clearer understanding of the relationship between themselves and their products. As Marx emphasizes in the *Grundrisse*, "Nature does not construct machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc. They are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of man's will over Nature, or of man's activity in Nature."<sup>5</sup>

While of course everyone knows that one does not come across a locomotive in nature in just the same way one stumbles upon a frog or a ravine, it is important to fully recognize just how much promise such developments hold out for the immense ability of human beings to shape their natural and social world based on human understanding. Creations such as machines, railways, "self-acting mules" and, we can add, computers, airplanes, mRNA vaccines, and all the rest are, in Marx's words, "organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified." He continues:

The development of fixed capital shows the degree to which society's general science, knowledge, has become an immediate productive force, and hence the degree to which the conditions of the social life process itself have been brought under the control of the general intellect and remoulded according to it.<sup>6</sup>

There is an all-too-common tendency to caricature Marx as a dull mechanist, stubbornly insensible to the importance of ideas. But in examining Marx's views in the way that I have, I am convinced that quite the opposite is true. Marx is extremely clear and forceful about the power of human knowledge, and he is only *more* successful than idealist thinkers on this point because he is not forced to resort to mysticism in order to explain how it is that human beings can realize their ideas in the external world.

Far from themes of freedom, alienation, and individuality taking a back seat to a one-sided and untenable economic determinism in Marx's later works, they become the subject of an even deeper engagement during this period, as does the moral conception that they are a part of. It is here in these later works that Marx most clearly and explicitly theorizes the full development of "rich individuality" as the highest aim for human beings.

## What Now?

A quarter of the way through the Twenty-First century, we live in a time of ever-deepening crisis. How do we find our way out? Capitalism does not have

the answer and it would much rather we didn't ask the question. A better world remains possible—for now—but only if we undertake and succeed at the monumental task of forging ourselves as a species, not only as biological fact but also as self-aware, sociohistorical force. Without this, we are doomed.

In these pages, I have argued for a particular way of interpreting Marx's writings. I have refused to dissect it for parts and insisted instead on situating it within its Hegelian tradition. I have attempted to retain and defend Marx's commitment to understanding all of Being as one dynamic, processual, and thoroughly interrelated whole.

Human self-recognition is species-awareness, but it is also more than that. It is awareness of ourselves as one with nature, with all of existence. It is awareness that our fortune is tied to that of the natural world. This awareness can help guide us toward a relationship with nature not merely as one more resource to exploit but as material existence that is continuous with our own.

Marx writes of labor as a kind of "metabolism" between human bodies and their environments. Understanding our relationship to nature in this way can help us to recognize its future as ours. We would do so neither as "masters" of it, nor in ascetic abstention from its abundance, and still less as lowly supplicants to it. Rather, through the metabolism of labor, we would forge our essential oneness with nature as its own living consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

As Marx famously put it, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>8</sup> But the rub is that we cannot do one except by also doing the other. This is the core of what it means to do theory from the point of view of labor. How does the world appear as it is changed by human hands? What light does our own collective power of creation cast upon us as we join our hands and set good things into motion? This book, a product of scholarship and struggle, is my contribution to a long-standing and ongoing human project of working out the answers to these questions and acting to change the world accordingly. Here, I leave my reader with these questions in the hope that you too may be moved.

## Coda

### “The Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists,” Yesterday and Today

In mid-summer 1969, University of California Los Angeles had newly appointed the Black American Marxist philosopher, Angela Davis, as Acting Assistant Professor of Philosophy. On September 19, 1969—before Davis had so much as taught her first class—the University of California Board of Regents adopted a resolution calling for her contract to be terminated, in an effort championed by then-Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. The ostensibly fireable offense? Davis’s membership in the Communist Party USA.<sup>1</sup>

This firing sparked a battle on multiple fronts: legal, political, and academic. Legally, Davis challenged the Regents’ decision in court. She won in a case decided by California Superior Court Judge, Jerry Pacht, who described the arguments made by UCLA’s legal counsel as a “terrifying” affront to academic freedom. Pacht cited the Regents’ *own* policy that “no political test shall ever be considered in the appointment and promotion of any faculty member or employee,” rejecting their claim that the right of political freedom ought to extend to everyone except, of course, Communists.<sup>2</sup> Davis was reappointed.

Academically, the movement to defend Angela Davis had a key lasting effect, with much of its momentum serving to help fuel the creation of Ethnic Studies departments at UCLA and on university campuses nationwide. Two thousand people arrived on the first day of lecture for Davis’s first class, “Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature,” vividly demonstrating the widespread hunger to learn from and with her.

Politically, the Regents’ firing of Davis sparked faculty organizing and student protests that served as a flashpoint of campus activism and struggle. In the months that followed, such political activity included massive anti-war rallies on campus, meetings of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and events to defend the right of free speech. Davis was a frequent, highly sought-after, and highly effective speaker at many of these events.<sup>3</sup> When the Regents



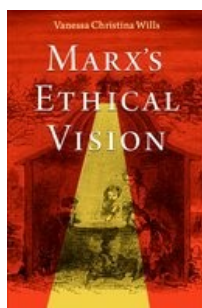
moved again in 1970 to dismiss Davis from her post—or rather, technically, when they opted not to reappoint her for another year—they cited her political speech as the basis for their decision. Ironically, they identified Davis and *her* ideas as a threat to academic freedom that had to be eliminated from the university environment. This time, the Regents were successful, and Davis was ousted. (It should be happily noted that later, however, Davis returned to the UC system where she was Professor of the History of Consciousness and of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Cruz, between 1991 and 2008. In a stroke of poetic justice, she also returned to speak at UCLA in 2014, where she was celebrated as a “Regents’ Lecturer.”)<sup>4</sup>

Angela Davis’s is the most widely publicized case of a professional philosopher in the US being targeted for her commitment to Marxist theory and struggle, but she is very far from being the only one. Indeed, the stage for the drama was already set by the so-called California Oath Controversy in 1950, when passage of the Levering Act in the state of California required state employees—including faculty at the University of California—to swear among other things that they were not members of the Communist Party. Among those dismissed from the faculty were Jacob Loewenberg, a Hegel scholar who refused to swear out the oath. Of course, California was hardly alone; Senator Joseph McCarthy’s campaign against “subversives” ushered in a period of artistic and intellectual repression that reached into all aspects of American society with predictably chilling effects for philosophy, a discipline that took the critique and subversion of dogma as its *raison d’être*.

The rhetorical strategy was patently sophistical, but devastatingly effective: the capitalist state would have to destroy free speech in order to save it. Communists, they argued, had no place in academia because they were not free inquirers at all, but rote dogmatists. Left to their own devices, the argument went, Communists could not be trusted to educate rather than indoctrinate their students and anyone else who would hear them. The academic enterprise of free inquiry, then, was incompatible with communism and required that any person committed to promoting communism be excised from the academic community.

In this respect, today we hear the loud echoes of yesterday, meant to drown out scholarly inquiry. The challenges that scholars face, which prevent a serious and productive engagement with Marx’s ideas, come not only from conflicting theoretical commitments and internecine disputes over method, but also from the exercise of legal, economic, and political power aimed squarely at preventing it. Not only is this the case for thought about Marx, but

also, as we see today, for myriad forms of anti-racist and anti-sexist theory, and indeed for all theory that seeks to critique oppressive and exploitative systems and ideologies. In this environment, it remains as important as ever to insist upon recontextualizing, resituating, reevaluating, rethinking, and yes, even *thinking* Marxism and other radical theories. My aim in this book has been to do just that: to contribute to the scholarly understanding of these ideas, to resist their misrepresentation and caricature, to stand in a tradition with those authors who have been doing this necessary work, and to inspire others to take up this urgent task, as well.



Marx's Ethical Vision

Vanessa Christina Wills

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END MATTER

## Notes

Vanessa Christina Wills

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## Chapter 1

1. For more about the 2008 collapse of the Lehman Brothers investment bank, see Mahmoud Mofid Abdul Karim's 2021 "Failure of Lehman Brothers."
2. A survey of periodicals over the past decade paints a picture of renewed mainstream engagement with Marxism. For example, in 2012, *The Guardian* published "Why Marxism Is On the Rise Again." In 2017, *The Atlantic* sought to explain "Why the Phrase 'Late Capitalism' is Suddenly Everywhere." And in 2018, *The Economist* exhorted, "Rulers of the World: Read Karl Marx!"
3. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Interestingly, in his 2018 book *Identity*, Fukuyama argues that identity politics and their demands for respect and recognition have delayed the end of history a while longer.
4. The "gadfly" metaphor comes from Plato's *Apology*. Charged with corrupting the youth of Athens, Plato explains, "And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God, or lightly reject his boon by condemning me. For if you kill me you will not easily find another like me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. And as you will not easily find another like me, I would advise you to spare me." See also my 2016, "Philosophy as a Virtuous Irritation."
5. This is Charles Mills's challenge to ideal theory in Rawls and others. In his 2009 article "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," Mills writes, "what distinguishes ideal theory is not merely the use of ideals, since obviously nonideal theory can and will use ideals also (certainly it will appeal to the moral ideals, if it may be more dubious about the value of invoking idealized human capacities). What distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual."

6. I use the terms “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably throughout this book, and neither in an inherently pejorative manner. I do this for two closely related reasons. The first is that English-speakers, and even English-speaking philosophers, are in no widespread agreement at all about how these two terms ought to be disambiguated from one another or even if they should be. I find it preferable neither to assume nor imply any stable linguistic distinction between their meanings and instead to spell out any further necessary conceptual clarifications as they are needed. Secondly, Marx himself used an array of German terms interchangeably throughout his writing. In *The Communist Manifesto*, “die Moral” seems to apply to the same thing he elsewhere calls “Sittlichkeit” in the course of his attacks on Max Stirner. He used “Moralität” similarly. Marx occasionally used “*Ethik*,” a word drawn from Greek, to refer to the work of ancient Greek philosophers such as Epicurus and Diogenes, but did not do so in a way that suggested he meant to sharply distinguish it from *die Moral*. This being said, where I use the term “moralism” or variants thereof, I always mean to speak of the kind of sanctimonious imperatives that Marx abhors. “Moralism,” for example, would apply to the cynical use of apparently moral language, directed at others, to produce in them a commitment to ethical ideals which come at a cost to them and some benefit to the speaker. It would also apply to attempts to change society purely through moral appeal.
7. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (hereafter, “MECW”) 5:247.
8. Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital,” MECW 9:197. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:306.
9. Jack Amariglio and Yahya M. Madra capture the situation well when they write, “Karl Marx is an unusual figure in the history of ethical and economic thought. Perhaps few such internationally influential thinkers have been so (apparently) contradictorily understood. He is variously interpreted as being a trenchant moral critic of the exploitation and alienation of the existing industrial capitalist social order (Buchanan, 1982; Geras 1985, 1992); an amoral historicist who relegated ethics to the realm of ‘false consciousness’; a broadly conceived moralist who rejected ‘the moral point of view’ (Miller, 1984); a moral relativist who regarded ethical norms as incommensurable, culturally/locationally specific, and constantly changing along with transformations in concrete economic conditions; an ethical visionary who proposed one of the more enduring conceptions of economic and distributive justice over the past two centuries (DiQuattro, 1998); a strict economic determinist, who assigned to ethics a not-so-privileged place in the ‘superstructure’ of politics, law, religion, and ideology; a pre-Nietzschean nihilist, who saw ‘values’ as a blind for humans living fully (Ruccio and Amariglio, 2003); a one-sided ethical partisan, who reserved for the working classes an objective position within morality worth its historical weight; a transcendental humanist who believed that shared, communal ethical standards would triumph over the course of humanity’s long haul (Kain, 1988); and much else besides.” (Amariglio and Madra, “Karl Marx,” in *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*, 325.)
10. As Ricardo Brown puts the point in his 1999 article “Marx and the Foundations of the Critical Theory of Morality and Ethics,” Marx’s early writings “should be seen as moments in Marx’s overcoming and exposing of bourgeois morality . . . the results of this critique are to be found within a later work like the *Grundrisse*.” Paul Blackledge has made a similar argument in his 2012 book *Marxism and Ethics*, as does Norman Geras in his 1983 book *Marx and Human Nature*, and as do others.
11. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 15:251.
12. Terell Carver describes some of the history of the production of *The Critique of the German Ideology* as a single text in his 2010 article “*The German Ideology* Never Took Place.”
13. Goldstick, “Marx, Marxism, Ethics,” 95.
14. The capitalist state’s outright hostility to communal ways of being is evidenced in the United States’ destructive patterns of behavior toward Native cultures and communities. We see this, for example, in the Dawes Act of 1887, which privatized previously communally held Native lands and enjoined Native people to adopt “the habits of civilized life,” which is to say, of life based on the principle of private property. See Emily Greenwald’s 2002, *Reconfiguring the Reservation*.
15. Paul Blackledge’s 2010 essay “Marxism, Nihilism, and the Problem of Ethical Politics Today” offers an illuminating discussion of the nihilist reading’s career among interpreters of Marx such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Simon Critchley. The question of Marxism’s purported nihilism is also taken up in David B. Myers’s 1976 essay “Marx and the Problem of Nihilism.” Myers rightly concludes, “Far from opening the door to the ‘everything is permissible’ dictum, Marx’s criteria were in fact restrictive. What happens in history is good (i.e., human) (1) only if it involves the ‘self-liberation’

of a hitherto oppressed class and (2) only if this class creates a classless society in which no one is allowed to develop his personality and satisfy his material needs in such a way as to prevent the human development of other individuals” (203–204).

16. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:186.
17. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:28.
18. As William Briggs aptly puts it in his 2019 book *Classical Marxism in an Age of Capitalist Crisis*, “Marxist critiques flourish, not only of capitalism but of other Marxist theories. . . . Perversely there is one thing that unites a great many of these writers and theorists. It is the view that classical Marxism, while representing an important place in history, is pretty much a museum-piece” (12).
19. For more on the relationship between analytical philosophy and British Idealism, see W. J. Mander’s *British Idealism*, Peter Hacker’s “The Linguistic Turn in Analytic Philosophy,” and Nicholas Griffin’s “Russell and Moore’s Revolt against British Idealism.”
20. In his 1995 book *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, Cohen himself allowed that it was probably more accurate to think of this school of thought as made up of “semi-Marxists” (144). The question is raised also in Michael Lebowitz’s 1988 essay “Is ‘Analytical Marxism’ Marxism?,” in Marcus Roberts’s 1997 book *Analytical Marxism: A Critique*, and in Paul Blackledge’s 2015 essay “G. A. Cohen and the Limits of Analytical Marxism.”
21. Shelby, “Afro-Analytical Marxism and the Problem of Race.”
22. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” MECW 5:3.
23. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:49.
24. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, MECW 25: 270–271. Here, Engels partially echoed Proudhon’s coinage of the phrase, “scientific socialism” in the following passage from *What is Property?*: “In a given society the authority of man over man is universally proportional to the intellectual development which that society has reached, and the probable duration of that authority can be calculated from the more or less general desire for a true government, that is, for a government based on science. And just as the right of force and the right of stratagem retreat before the growing awareness of justice and must finally be extinguished in equality, so the sovereignty of the will gives way to the sovereignty of the reason and ends up being replaced by a scientific socialism. Property and royalty have been crumbling ever since the beginning of the world” (Proudhon, *What is Property?*, 208–209).
25. Althusser, *For Marx*.
26. Wood, *Karl Marx*.
27. Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism*; Mills, *The Racial Contract*; Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*.
28. The world’s ruling classes’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. Very few governments took the rational course of action to immediately initiate funded lockdowns during which people would have their basic material needs met so they could stay home and not spread the illness. The United States’ ruling class continues to oppose universal healthcare—even in the midst of a global pandemic. Yet the pandemic also showed the capacity of governments and pharmaceutical companies to coordinate rapid development of safe, effective vaccines. It’s worth noting that even so, science illiteracy among much of the general public after decades of miseducation and undereducation threatens to undermine the whole endeavor.
29. The continuing relevance of Marxist theory in our time is due to the fact that nearly 200 years later, we remain trapped in Marx’s time and it is capitalism that keeps us there. As Terry Eagleton notes in his book *Why Marx Was Right*, “The final limit on capitalism, Marx once commented, is capital itself, the constant reproduction of which is a frontier beyond which it cannot stray. There is thus something curiously static and repetitive about this most dynamic of all historical regimes. The fact that its underlying logic remains pretty constant is one reason why the Marxist critique of it remains largely valid. Only if the system were genuinely able to break beyond its own bounds, inaugurating something unimaginably new, would this cease to be the case. But capitalism is incapable of inventing a future which does not ritually reproduce its present” (10).

30. Rodriguez, “Texas’ Lieutenant Governor Suggests Grandparents Are Willing to Die for US Economy.”

## Chapter 2

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1. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5: 36–37.
2. Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263.
3. Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263.
4. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 66.
5. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487.
6. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487.
7. Georg Lukács described this trajectory in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German thought in his book *Destruction of Reason*, warning there that any land “with an imperialist economy, or any other bourgeois culture which is overshadowed by irrationalism” is at risk of being “taken over tomorrow by a fascist maniac compared to whom Hitler himself may have been only a clumsy novice” (91).
- p. 251 8. It is a useful exercise to consider how well or poorly the deism of the United States’ “founding fathers” would have squared with the 1950s Red Scare’s particular uses of religiosity as a bulwark against communism. Not incidentally, the addition of the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance was championed by a minister, George M. Docherty, who believed that US patriotism should be more closely patterned on the United Kingdom’s lingering feudalism. “I came from Scotland, where we said ‘God save our gracious queen,’ ‘God save our gracious king,’” Docherty recalled in a 2004 interview. President Dwight Eisenhower approved the addition of these words to the pledge in 1954, at the height of the Red Scare (Siegel, “The Gripping Sermon That Got ‘Under God’ Added to the Pledge of Allegiance on Flag Day”).
9. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503.
10. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6: 165–166.
11. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:501.
12. Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6:166. Also, a note from the MECW: “Marx quotes these words from the following passage of Lucretius’s poem *On The Nature of Things* (Book III, line 869): ‘*mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit*’ (‘when mortal life has been taken away by immortal death’).”
13. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503.
14. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:494
15. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:494.
16. In his 2003 essay “‘Ideology’ in Marx and Engels,” Mills asserts that it is really “grasping at straws” to appeal to this passage as evidence of the contested character of ideology. “Obviously,” Mills writes, “Marx and Engels’ implication is that these individuals’ being ‘bourgeois ideologists’ has been an *obstacle* to such comprehension, which is precisely why ‘raising themselves’ has been necessary” (25). But here, Mills conspicuously omits the section of this passage in which Marx *credits* bourgeois ideologists with contributing “fresh elements of enlightenment and progress” to the workers’ movement. This statement is hardly ambiguous in its warm approval. Any plausibility that the “straw” insult might have had does not survive payment of attention to the remainder of Marx’s sentence. While it is perfectly correct that these individuals had to “raise themselves” beyond bourgeois ideology, the internally contradictory nature of bourgeois consciousness itself, particularly of its liberal variants, does help prepare the ground for that leap.
17. Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263.
18. Kai Nielsen, in his 1989 book *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, observes correctly, I think, that morality “works to

get people to accept the established order or, where it is a revolutionary ideology, to accept a new postulated revolutionary social order. It typically serves ruling class interests although sometimes it can also be an ideological weapon of a rising class in its struggle with the dominant class” (109).

19. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503.
20. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504.
21. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504.
22. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:506.
23. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504–505.
- p. 252 24. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 6:505.
25. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” MECW 24:95. In his 2019 book *Marx on Emancipation and Socialist Goals*, Robert Ware explains, “Marx thoroughly embraced democracy . . . it is necessary to overcome strong ideological resistance to even thinking that Marx would contemplate democracy of any form in an ideal, or even good, society. . . . [A] misconception arises from an especially troubling bit of text from Marx (and Engels), a phrase that has been the brunt of attack but also the source of ideal models, that of the dictatorship of the proletariat. . . . Very simply, Marx’s point was that the proletariat needs to form a democratic republic, through universal suffrage, in which the proletariat would rule politically, replacing the bourgeois dictatorship (or rule) by a dictatorship (or rule) of the proletariat” (161–162).
26. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 108.
27. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 183.
28. Consider for example Marx’s rejoinder to Feuerbach that “the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin) and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach” (Marx, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:40). On Marx’s view, nothing, whether ideal or material, that exists for human beings exists independently of human history.
29. Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 257.
30. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:36–37.
31. Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:182.
32. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:37.
33. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:37.
34. Abercrombie and Turner, “The Dominant Ideology Thesis,” 151.
35. Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology,’ and Moral Objectivism,” 378.
36. Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology,’ and Moral Objectivism,” 393.
37. Marx and Engels, *The Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:36. Emphasis mine.
38. In his 2011 essay “Karl Marx: Critique as Emancipatory Practice,” Robin Celikates presents an analysis of Marx’s critique of religion, and of Marx’s critique of Young Hegelian critics of religion, that illuminates this point very clearly. Celikates writes, “Marx understands religion as a symptom of real social and political conflicts rather than as a mere delusion or an error for which the believers could be blamed . . . The critique of religion cannot be merely cognitive, for just appealing to the subjects’ consciousness will not change the underlying reality” (110). What holds true here for religious ideology is the case for other forms, as well. If there is any lesson we are supposed to draw from Marx’s critique of ideology, it is that mystification is a *sociopolitical* problem in the material structuring of our lives—it is not a philosophical puzzle to be dissolved through recognition.

39. Mills, “‘Ideology’ in Marx and Engels,” 15.
40. One might imagine that a consequence of this is that the abolition of ideology implies, implausibly, the abolition of superstructure altogether. But of course this is not the case. It does, however, imply the abolition of the *ideological characteristics* of the superstructure in class society.
- p. 253 41. McCarney writes in his 1980 book *The Real World of Ideology*, “Now the general definition implicit in Marx’s practice is that forms of consciousness are ideological if, and only if, they serve class interests” (8).
42. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263.
43. Mills, “‘Ideology’ in Marx and Engels: Revised and Revisited,” 29.
44. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, MECW 5:3.
45. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács writes, “The class consciousness of the bourgeoisie may well be able to reflect all the problems of organisation entailed by its hegemony and by the capitalist transformation and penetration of total production. But it becomes obscured as soon as it is called upon to face problems that remain within its jurisdiction but which point beyond the limits of capitalism” (54).
46. Wills, “PPE in Marx’s Materialist Conception of History,” 50.
47. It is worth noting that in accordance with such an approach, and having dismissed Marx’s account of how ideological forms of thought arise as a necessary consequence of alienating, particularizing, and mystifying material conditions, Cohen substituted an idealist, psychologistic, and ahistorical explanation for the persistence of ideological forms of thought. “The disposition to generate ideology,” Cohen wrote in his 1981 essay “Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism,” “and the disposition to consume it, are fundamental traits of human nature.” I will leave it to the reader to judge whether a richer methodology is in evidence here.
48. In a 2001 interview, Erik Olin Wright recalls, “I attended what came to be called the Analytical Marxism group (or more self-mockingly: the NBSMG, ‘no-Bullshit Marxism Group’). This is a circle of ten or so scholars from several countries who have met once a year since 1979, originally in London and now in New York, to discuss work broadly relevant to radical egalitarian politics and social theory” (Kirby, “An Interview with Erik Olin Wright,” 4).
49. Furner, *Marx on Capitalism*, 484–485.
50. This is the view that R. G. Peffer puts forward in his 1990 book *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*. In *Marx and Ethics*, Philip J. Kain argues, against Althusser, that Marx continues to be a humanist after *The German Ideology*, but defends his view by contending that he does “not think that humanism is ideological” (6). But I do not think that Marx espouses what would be a premature abolition of ideology, and I do not think that in order to show that an idea or system of ideas is progressive, one must first establish that it is nonideological.
51. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:495.
52. As Charles Mills writes, “The recurrent theme in Marx and Engels’s writings is . . . the ‘impotence’ of morality, the causal inefficaciousness of moral preaching” (Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology’ and Moral Objectivism,” 389).
53. Cornu, “German Utopianism: ‘True’ Socialism,” 97.
54. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:515.
- p. 254 55. In addition to their critique of Semmig, Marx and Engels also criticize Karl Grün on the grounds that Grün thinks all that is needed to transform human society is for consumers to be educated so as to consume in a “human” way (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:518). Marx and Engels argue that this “moral postulate of *human* ↴ consumption” is insufficient as it does not address the “real conditions of production” and the “productive activity of men.” While there are numerous ways in which consumption takes on a distorted character in capitalist society, the idea that society can be transformed through simply lecturing people to consume less is thoroughly implausible. Furthermore, while consumption can be transformed, there is no need to limit overall human consumption because, Marx and Engels argue, production can be improved and revolutionized further so that higher, not lower, levels of consumption are possible and usual. This, they argue, would be possible in a different economic system that was consciously aimed at



the satisfaction of human beings. The development and expansion of industry has played an enormously progressive role in human history and brought into existence innovations in production that make it possible for the first time in human history to produce enough for all human beings. The problem is not, at least not primarily or fundamentally, that human beings consume “inhumanly,” but rather, that production is carried out in a wasteful manner and is not itself carried out with the satisfaction of human needs as its organizing principle. Marx and Engels add, “those economists who took consumption as their starting-point happened to be reactionary and ignored the revolutionary element in competition and large-scale industry” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:519).

56. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:465.
57. Marx and Engels, “True Socialism” in *The Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:478.
58. Marx and Engels, “True Socialism” in *The Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:462.
59. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:514.
60. Paden, “Marx’s Critique of the Utopian Socialists,” 75.
61. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:213.

## Chapter 3

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1. As it happens, whether or not this was Hume’s intention is itself a matter of some philosophical debate. Daniel Singer, in his 2015 essay “Mind the Is–Ought Gap,” argues that it is misleading to sum Hume’s principle up as “no ought from an is.” Alasdair MacIntyre, in his 1959 essay “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’” argues that to take “Hume to be asserting here that no set of nonmoral premises can entail a moral conclusion . . . is inadequate and misleading” (452). Indeed, MacIntyre takes Hume’s moral theory to crucially depend on a central purported fact: that human beings have common interests. And MacIntyre takes Marx’s theoretical move vis-à-vis Humean ethics to be the denial of that supposed fact and the insistence that human beings in class society do not have common interests; this denial is one MacIntyre himself endorses, arguing in his 1981 book *After Virtue* that “What Hume identifies as the standpoint of universal human nature turns out in fact to be that of the prejudices of the Hanoverian ruling elite” (231). But a precise accounting of how we ought to understand Hume’s views on the relation between “is” and “ought” is outside of the scope of this book and, in the end, not central to the point I wish to make here about Marx, which is that Marx’s approach to ethics must be contrasted with what many moral philosophers take to be a cardinal rule of normative theory, one learned from Hume.
2. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 418.
3. For an in-depth discussion of the impact of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* on Marx’s dialectical method in works such as his *Grundrisse*, see Mark Meaney’s 2013 *Capital as Organic Unity: the Role of Hegel’s Science of Logic in Marx’s Grundrisse*. Meaney’s careful analysis of the two works’ structures is itself anticipated by V. I. Lenin’s observations in the course of his study of Hegel. Lenin concluded in his essay “Conspectus of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*”: “It is impossible completely to understand Marx’s *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!”
4. As Robin Celikates notes in his 2011 essay “Karl Marx: Critique as Emancipatory Practice,” for Marx, human nature “is subject to social conditions and historical changes, and in the final analysis has to be understood as the object of humanity’s self-creation through labour” (104).
5. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” MECW 5:4.
6. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” MECW 5:4.
7. Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics*, 3.
8. For a very interesting and useful further treatment of the similarities between Marx’s moral naturalism and that of Aristotle, as well as of the important differences between them, see McCarthy, “German Social Ethics and the Return to Greek Philosophy: Marx and Aristotle.”

9. In *The Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx writes:

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a "productive force." Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the "history of humanity" must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:43)

10. Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* Vol. 2, 7.

11. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:31. Emphasis in the original.

12. In his book *Marx's Concept of Man*, Erich Fromm summarizes the role of labor in the following apt terms: "Labor is the factor which mediates between man and nature; labor is man's effort to regulate his metabolism with nature. Labor is the expression of human life and through labor man's relationship to nature is changed, hence through labor man changes himself" (13).

13. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:188.

p. 256 14. As James Furner puts this point in his 2015 essay "Marx with Kant on Exploitation," "As humans are aware of themselves as members of a kind, they interpret the exercise of their potentialities in light of a conception of the potentialities of the human species as an interdependent whole" (36).

15. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:276. Emphasis mine.

16. For a book-length treatment of the concept of human nature in Marx's thought, see Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature*. Of possible further interest is Terry Eagleton's reply to Sayers's book, "Self-Realization, Ethics and Socialism," *New Left Review* 237, no. 1 (1999). Eagleton argues against Sayers that it is unsatisfactory to suggest that human nature is the totality of human activity. However, Marx does make an abstraction, the labor process, out of this concrete totality of appearances, as I argue here.

17. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:187.

18. In his 2019 book *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism (Volume Two)*, Adrian Johnston writes, "A certain conception of the activity of labor obviously lies at the rock-bottom basis of the historical materialism of Marx throughout his intellectual itinerary. According to a materialist rendition of the dialectical interactions between subject and object, laboring praxis is the catalytic source of the immanent genesis of denaturalized history out of nature itself, the very origin of history as history proper. Put differently, human subjectivity, as fully an inner part of the physical universe, sets in motion trajectories of transformation by working upon and over its environments of surrounding objects (at first naturally given things, but, soon after these trajectories are launched, an additional teeming plethora, an ever-increasing swarm, of fabricated entities). In this internal torsion of a lone, Otherless nature that, as Hegel would put it, is not only substance but also subject, a single plane of material being comes self-reflexively to alter itself by giving rise to laboring subjects working in, on, and through material objects (themselves included)" (93).

19. In a 2002 paper, Ruth Abbey argues that Daniel Brudney is not sufficiently thorough in his presentation of Marx's conception of human nature. Abbey writes: "Brudney acknowledges that Marx had a conception of human essence: 'Marx's thought is that human beings are most essentially creatures who interact with the material world'. Brudney sees Marx as 'claiming that an obvious fact—that we transform the material world—reveals what is essential to our nature.' These tenets are correct, but do not go far enough. The significant omission lies in Marx's concern with how people work and transform their world. Because animals also interact with and transform the material world to ensure survival, Brudney's depiction of what is essential to humans does not capture their species distinction" (151–152).

20. According to Nasser, the *ergon* argument, found initially in Aristotle, "presupposes the following three claims: 1) that it makes sense, and is correct, to say that nature endows man qua man with a special function to perform, 2) that this function can be ascertained by determining the kind of activity that distinguishes *homo sapiens* (or, in Marx's case, as

we shall see, *homo faber*) from every other species, and 3) that such activity is (the moral) *good* for man” (“Marx’s Ethical Anthropology,” 486).

21. Here Nasser quotes Donald C. Hodges, “Marx’s Ethics and Ethical Theory,” 231.

p. 257 22. It will be seen that this reading of Marx puts me into stark disagreement with Allen Wood, who writes in his 1972 essay “Marx’s Critical Anthropology” that “Marx seems . . . to acknowledge no concept of man which could serve as a standard against which his present existence could be measured and criticized” (124).

23. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:36.

24. The method I describe here is not explicitly laid out by Marx in the way that I have spelled it out. However, one instance in which Marx clearly applies this method is in *The German Ideology*. Marx writes that “the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals” (MECW 5:31). He then goes on to a series of concrete determinations: how human beings produce to maintain their existence, and how they relate to nature, their division of labor, the emergence of exchange, the development of nations and the productive forces of those nations, and so on.

25. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:37.

26. Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:182.

27. Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 157–158.

28. Marx, “1842 Letter to Arnold Ruge,” MECW 1:395.

29. Wills, “Marx,” 49.

30. Marx, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:40.

31. Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, 25.

32. In his 1988 book *Marx and Ethics*, Philip Kain writes, “For Marx the human essence develops. Marx’s concept of need is an important tool for understanding this development. New needs arise and are transformed in the context of evolving social conditions and relations. Moreover, new needs set the individual specific tasks and thus require transformation of the world if the need is to be satisfied. By following and understanding the reciprocal transformation of needs and of the world we can chart the development of the human essence” (25).

33. Chitty, “The Early Marx on Needs,” 26.

34. The passage continues, and it is worth quoting at some length:

The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act. . . .

The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the family. The family, which to begin with is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one (except in Germany), and must then be treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to “the concept of the family,” as is the custom in Germany. These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects or, to make it clear to the Germans, three “moments,” which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today. (*The Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:42)

p. 258 35. Marx, “Human Requirements and the Division of Labour,” MECW 3:313.

36. Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 124.

37. Marx, *Human Requirements and the Division of Labour*, MECW 3:306.
38. Marx, *Human Requirements and the Division of Labour*, MECW 3:308.
39. Lukács writes, “the unfolding of human abilities and needs forms the objective foundation for all value, and for its objectivity . . . If any value whatsoever is investigated for its ultimate ontological foundation, then we unfailingly come up against the development of human abilities as the orientation governing it, as its adequate object, and this as the product of human activity itself” (*The Ontology of Social Being*, 80).
40. Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:264.
41. For an interesting treatment of the concept of “rich individuality” in Marx, see Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative*.
42. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 15:251.
43. *Der Mensch ist ein Thier, das nur in der Gesellschaft sich vereinzeln kann* (English: MECW 28:18, German MEW 13:616).
44. Marx writes, “Man becomes individualized only through the process of history. Originally he is a *species being*, a *tribal being*, a *herd animal*—though by no means a zoon politikon in the political sense. Exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation. It makes herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 15:420).
45. Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, 2.
46. Estlund, “Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy,” 208.
47. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:52.

## Chapter 4

1. There have been attempts to conceptualize alienation while rejecting the concept of human nature, with one of the most notable recent examples at this being Rahel Jaeggi’s 2014 *Alienation*. As Frederick Neuhouser contends in an introduction to that work, the alienation concept must be “resurrected” because “traditional conceptions of alienation generally depend on substantive, essentialist pictures of human nature—accounts of ‘the human essence’—that are no longer compelling” (xi). Jaeggi herself argues that “overcoming alienation does not mean returning to an undifferentiated state of oneness with oneself and the world,” a tenet which she invokes to overcome what she takes to be two otherwise insuperable problems for the concept of alienation: “on the one hand, its essentialism and its perfectionist orientation around a conception of the essence or nature of human beings . . .; on the other hand, the ideal of reconciliation—the ideal of a unity free of tension—that seems to be bound up with alienation critique when it takes the form of social theory or of a theory of identity” (2).  
 Yet Marxism is not committed to asserting the desirability of any “undifferentiated state of oneness with oneself and the world”—it is precisely the actively differentiating ↴ role of history, in allowing for the proliferation of an ever-expanding array of new forms of social Being, that lies at the heart of a Marxist account of what it is to abolish our alienation from the productive powers which make such expansion and differentiation possible. For this reason and others, my treatment of the alienation concept is motivated by a commitment much like that which Chris Byron expresses in his 2016 article “Essence and Alienation,” where he writes, “human nature is a *necessary* condition for demonstrating that alienation does occur in capitalist society, and presumably any other society that suppresses the better parts of species-being” (376).
2. And yet at the same time, Rainer Forst is exactly right to remind us that “the theme of *Entfremdung* in Marx must never be reduced to an ethical issue of being ‘truly’ and authentically oneself, as it first and foremost addresses relations of *Knechtung*, that is, of social domination in the form of economic exploitation and general political and legal oppression” (Forst, “Noümenal Alienation,” 541).
3. In *Marxism and Ethics*, Paul Blackledge notes the relationship between alienation and the division of labor when he writes, “The necessary (social) aspect of the division of labour acts both as the material basis from our present (capitalist) alienation from the product of our labours, and the alternative potential that we might exercise real democratic control over society” (58).

4. Althusser, *For Marx*, 84.
5. For a detailed, book-length treatment of the continuity in Marx's concept of alienation, see Istvan Mészáros's, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. Also, in Lawrence Wilde's 1998 book on Marxism and morality, Wilde argues that in *The German Ideology*, Marx "affirms his adherence to his earlier position in which communism was conceived as a struggle for the appropriation of the human essence" (Wilde, *Ethical Marxism and Its Radical Critics*, 22).
6. King, "King: Minimum Wage Increase Will Hurt Small Business."
7. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:65.
8. Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 35.
9. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:174.
10. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:276.
11. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:276.
12. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4:36.
13. Marx, *Comments on James Mill*, MECW 3:220.
14. Marx, "Rent of Land," MECW 3:266.
15. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 159.
16. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:272.
17. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:272.
18. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:274.
19. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:274.
20. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:275.
21. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:275.
22. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:279.
23. Marx, "Estranged Labour," MECW 3:279.
24. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:182.
- p. 260 25. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4:36.
26. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:280.
27. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87.
28. Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," MECW 9:202.
29. Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," MECW 9:203.
30. Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," MECW 9:202.
31. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:490.
32. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:411.
33. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:591.
34. Marx's emphasis.

35. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:411–412.
36. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:365.
37. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:87.
38. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:82–83.
39. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:425–426.
40. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 44.
41. Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, 144–145.
42. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:570. My emphasis.
43. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:64.
44. Gilman-Opalsky, *The Communism of Love*.

## Chapter 5

1. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, MECW 11:103.
2. One place where this idea is most fully developed is in Engels's "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man." For a modern expansion of this notion, one might look to the works of evolutionary psychologist, Michael Tomasello, whose work traces the sociohistorically situated origins and emergence of communication, cognition, and morality. Nowhere in his works does Tomasello cite Marx or claim to be engaged in a Marxist project. However, for one familiar with Marx's and Engels's writings on the natural and social development of the human species, it is striking just how very much Tomasello's conclusions are much as Marx and Engels would have predicted would be revealed in a careful study of the natural emergence of human sociality and its role in determining the development and expression of human nature. In his 2019 book *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny*, Tomasello presents his theory as "placing human sociocultural activity within the framework of modern evolutionary theory. Human children inherit a sociocultural context replete with cultural artifacts, symbols, and institutions, and their unique maturational capacities would be inert without a sociocultural context within which to develop. Normal human ontogeny thus requires *both* the maturation of species-unique cognitive and social capacities and also individual experience in such things as collaborative and communicative interactions with others, structured by cultural artifacts such as linguistic conventions and social norms."

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↳ Rather than taking the competitive individual as the basis of his conception of human nature, Tomasello argues that human beings distinguished themselves from giant apes through their sociality:

"The creation of a joint agent—while each partner maintains her own individual role and perspective at the same time—created a completely new human psychology, spawning new forms of both cognition and sociality" (Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 15).

My point here is not that the two perspectives are exactly aligned. What is striking, however, is the importance of a key assumption: that human nature is itself a historically emergent product of human's being socially mediated productive activity, initially aimed at satisfying their needs of subsistence.

3. I began to use the term "dialectical compatibilism" as early as 2017 to describe Marxist theory's implications regarding the relationship between freedom and determinism. Since then, I am aware of one occurrence of the term in print: Adrian Johnston uses the phrase independently in his 2020 essay "The Triumph of Theological Economics." Of course, it's not surprising that two theorists would happen upon this phrase. It is important, though, to distinguish their uses. Johnston employs the phrase to illuminate how "Subjects write the very scripts they also play out" (32). My aim in applying the phrase "dialectical compatibilism" is to emphasize the historical co-constitution of free and deterministic

elements in human agency, and the sense in which freedom is itself counterintuitively produced by deterministic processes in human history.

4. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 93.
5. My translation. Biesecker and Kesting, *Mikroökonomik*, 75.
6. Townshend, *The Politics of Marxism*, 19.
7. Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, 164–165.
8. Truitt, *Marxist Ethics*, 32.
9. Marx, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:195.
10. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:753.
11. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 282.
12. Marx, “Private Property and Labour,” MECW 3:302.
13. And as Kevin Brien has put the related point in his 1987 book *Marx, Reason, and the Art of Freedom*, “human beings are always more than antecedent conditions may have made them be, by virtue of their capacity to make what they become by their own activity” (40).
14. Englert, *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, 55.
15. Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:61. This is Englert’s translation of the text, and it appears in his *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, 56.
16. McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, 44–45.
17. Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:62.
18. Cicero, *On Fate*, 46–47.
19. Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:50.
20. McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, 31.
21. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:496.
22. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:508.
23. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:164.
24. Sherman, “Marx and Determinism,” 67.
- p. 262 25. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:304, Note 222.
26. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 37:44.
27. Engels, “Engels to Margaret Harkness in London; April, 1888,” MECW 48:168.
28. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:275–276.
29. Here Sherman is quoting Laird Addis, “The Individual and the Marxist Philosophy of History,” in Brodbeck, *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*.
30. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, MECW 11:103.
31. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:49.
32. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:619.

33. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:17.
34. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:19–20.

## Chapter 6

1. This is by no means universally the case. Notable exceptions include treatments such as Sowell, “Karl Marx and the Freedom of the Individual”; Shaw, “Socialist Individualism”; and Forbes, *Marx and the New Individual*. Jon Elster, in attempting to capture this aspect of Marx’s thought, also argues in his 1985 book *Making Sense of Marx* that whatever is valuable in Marx’s theory of history can be cashed out in terms of methodological individualism, although I think this is going too far, about which I say more near the end of the present section.
2. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:500.
3. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:420.
4. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487.
5. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:488.
6. Fenves, “Marx’s Doctoral Thesis on Two Greek Atomists and the Post-Kantian Interpretations,” 433.
7. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4:120–121.
8. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 334.
9. Marx and Engels, *Critique of The German Ideology*, MECW 5: 86–87.
10. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:499.
11. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:499.
12. Marx and Engels, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:18.
13. Marx and Engels, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:18.
14. Marx and Engels, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:420.
15. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:195.
16. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:251.
17. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:588.
18. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:305–306.
19. Wills, “Marx,” in *A Companion to Atheism and Philosophy*.
20. In their 2014 book *Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels’s “German Ideology Manuscripts,”* Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank endorse an argument, made by Inge Taubert in her 1990 essay “Wie entstand der ‘Deutsche Ideologie’ von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels?,” for the central importance of Marx’s and Engels’s writings on Max Stirner. Carver and Blank write, “Taubert’s expositions illustrate once again how important Marx and Engels’s critical examination of Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* was for the entire writing process of what is known to us as *The German Ideology*. Although Marx and Engels started out with an article on Bauer, it was in particular the critique of Stirner that became the basis not only for ‘*Sankt Bruno*,’ but—more importantly—for most of the so-called manuscripts on Feuerbach. In conclusion, it must be stressed that there can be no understanding of ‘*Sankt Bruno*’ and the so-called Feuerbach manuscripts if one fails to study ‘*Sankt Max*’ first” (106).
21. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*.



22. This title is also sometimes translated into English, more aptly, I think, as “*The Individual and His Property*.”
23. Thomas, “Karl Marx and Max Stirner,” 159.
24. Nicholas Churchich seems to concur with Stirner’s critique of Marx’s communism. Churchich writes, “While it is debatable whether Marx is an individualist or an anti-individualist, in *The German Ideology* he definitely argues for the primacy and supremacy of collectivism. Like Rousseau, he starts with individualism but ends with the sacrifice of the individual to the collective and of private interests to the interests of the whole” (*Marxism and Morality*, 165). Churchich does not provide a clear argument for this view, but it seems to me that his reason for holding it is that he rejects Marx’s claim that “abstract egoism” is a historical phenomenon produced by particular social and economic conditions, and not a necessary and ineliminable feature of human nature. Churchich writes that “Marx has failed to trace egoism to its real source within the personality of the human individual himself. He has also failed to understand that it is only by man’s own moral effort that the harmonisation of self-interest and common interests is possible. The centre of man’s moral and social life must be found within the self rather than outside it” (*Marxism and Morality*, 164). If that all is true, then Marx’s solution to the antagonism between individual and society would indeed be unsatisfactory. If Stirnerian egoism is an ineliminable part of human nature, then all the social transformations in the world could not resolve the conflict between such egoistic individuals, and the interests of the community taken as a whole, and so realizing social, communal goods would indeed mean violating the private interests of Stirnerian egoists. However, (1) it strikes me as somewhat disingenuous to attribute to Marx the view that he espouses the sacrifice of the individual, because Marx pointedly does *not* think that egoism is a necessary feature of human beings, and argues that the transition to the sort of socialist society he espouses would be a transition in which this egoism fades away as an aspect of human life; and (2) Churchich means to put the burden of proof onto Marx to show that human nature is plastic and adaptable, but it seems to me that it is Churchich who is operating with the much more robust and “thick” conception of human nature. What one would need in order to agree with him that Marx’s communism must necessarily involve the sacrifice of the individual’s interests, is a very good argument to show that it can never be possible for human beings to exist without Stirnerian egoism. When Churchich does attempt to give such an argument, he refers to something that is much like a <sup>↳</sup> soul—the immutable “personality of the human individual himself.” Elsewhere, he writes that “Moral values, it must be recognised, are rooted in the endeavour of personal spirits and without this endeavour they could not be sustained” (*Marxism and Morality*, 99). Churchich is openly hostile to materialism, at one point even taking on a rather suspicious tone with regard to Marx and Engels’s belief in evolution, “Assuming that men are the direct descendants of creatures which in the form of their bodies and brains were similar to apes, Engels indicates” (98). It seems to me that positing the existence of a “human personality” or of “personal spirits” which make Stirnerian egoism impossible to abolish involves much more controversial and tendentious assumptions than any that Marx can be accused of making.
25. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 5–7.
26. Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook*, 111.
27. Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook*, 130.
28. Thomas, “Karl Marx and Max Stirner,” 161–162.
29. As Lawrence Stepelevich notes in his essay “Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach,” the debate between these two thinkers “exercised a powerful influence not only upon Feuerbach, but upon Marx as well” (451).
30. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:342–343.
31. Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, 111.
32. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:213.
33. Blackledge, *Marx and Ethics*, 80.
34. Wood, *The Free Development of Each*, 266.
35. Mills, “Marxism, ‘Ideology,’ and Moral Objectivism,” 385.
36. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, 4–5.

37. Levine et al., “Marxism and Methodological Individualism,” 68.
38. Levine et al., 82.
39. Shiell, “On Marx’s Holism,” 239.
40. Shiell, “On Marx’s Holism,” 240.
41. Shiell, “On Marx’s Holism,” 244.
42. As Sally Haslanger points out in her 2020 essay “Failures of Methodological Individualism,” “An individualist social ontology places tremendous emphasis on the power of ‘collective intentionality’ to constitute the social world. But our powers are limited by material conditions, the complexity and fragmentation of societies, our embodiment, our ignorance, and the accidental bad effects of good intentions (not to mention the bad intentions). To understand societies, we must take all this into account. Understanding the multiple factors—material, cultural, historical, psychological—affecting our terms of coordination is necessary for critique, and for our efforts to promote social justice” (514).
43. Marx and Engels, *Critique of The German Ideology*, MECW 5:31.
44. As Luca Basso writes in his 2012 book *Marx and Singularity*, “Not only does Marx try to move beyond individualism and holism (to use sociological categories), he also brings to light their mutual implication: the individualist premiss of the debate, moving from the recognition of free and equal individuals, and their subsumption under an abstract social power, are two ‘sides’ of the same coin” (2).

## Chapter 7

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1. Marx, “The Civil War in France,” MECW 22:348.
2. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:186.
3. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:180.
4. “As far as the individual, real person is concerned, a wide field of choice, caprice and therefore of formal freedom is left to him” (Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:392).
5. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 28:180.
6. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:38.
7. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 150.
8. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:40.
9. Marx, *The Programme of the French Workers’ Party*, MECW 24:340.
10. Marx, “Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers’ Party,” MECW 24:340.
11. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504.
12. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 269.
13. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:306.
14. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:361.
15. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:730–731.
16. This is very influentially the case, for example, in the interpretation of Marx that Allen Wood presents in his 1981 book *Karl Marx*, about which we will say more later on in the present chapter.

17. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:506.
18. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* 64. Here I have preferred the translation found in the 1970 Cambridge University Press translation of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right."* Marx's original German text reads as follows: "Hegel ist nicht zu tadeln, weil er das Wesen des modernen Staats schildert, wie es ist, sondern weil er das, was ist, für das Wesen des Staats ausgibt. Daß das Vernünftige wirklich ist, beweist sich eben im Widerspruch der unvernünftigen Wirklichkeit, die an allen Ecken das Gegenteil von dem ist, was sie aussagt, und das Gegenteil von dem aussagt, was sie ist" (Marx/Engels-Werke 1:267). The MECW translates the selection thus: "Hegel is not to be blamed for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but for presenting that which is as the *nature of the state*. That the rational is actual is proved precisely in the *contradiction of irrational actuality*, which everywhere is the contrary of what it asserts, and asserts the contrary of what it is" (MECW 3:63). "Essence" strikes me as a more natural and less ambiguous translation of "Wesen" than does "nature," which is what appears in the MECW translation.
19. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:108
20. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* 65. Again, the Cambridge University Press translation is preferable to the MECW translation. Marx's original German text reads: "Das ständische Element ist die sanktionierte, gesetzliche Lüge der konstitutionellen Staaten, daß der Staat das Interesse des Volks oder daß das Volk das Staatsinteresse ist" (Marx/Engels-Werke 1:267). The MECW translation reads: "The estates element is the *sanctioned, legal lie* of constitutional states, the lie that the state is the *nation's interest*, or that the *nation* is the *interest of the state*" (MECW 3:65). ↪ Translating the word "Volk" as "nation," instead of "people," is potentially obscure here, as Marx's aim is to distinguish between the state interests and the interests of the individual persons living under the state.
21. *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* 142, Emphasis mine.
22. My translation. The original German text reads: "Marx sah, wie er in der 'Heiligen Familie' zum Ausdruck brachte, im konstitutionellen Repräsentativstaat, der durch die Revolution von 1830 geschaffen worden war, das vorläufige Endprodukt der 'politischen Aufklärung' der Bourgeoisie über ihre eigenen Klasseninteressen, den offiziellen Ausdruck ihrer ausschließlichen Macht, die politische Anerkennung ihres besonderen Interesses" (65).
23. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:109.
24. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:162–163.
25. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:163.
26. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4:113; Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:155.
27. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 156.
28. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 269.
29. Doğan, *Marx and Hegel on the Dialectic of the Individual and the Social*, 300.
30. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:164.
31. Of course, workers often do own small-scale property such as homes, cars, and so on. However, workers in general tend not to own much more than what is necessary to satisfy their own needs, construed narrowly. I am here contrasting personal private property with private property as capital. Capital is private property that gives its owner the ability to control the activity of others and subordinate it to one's own narrow ends. Workers may own small amounts of personal property, but this ownership does not allow them to purchase the labor power of others or to satisfy their needs by amassing capital. Moreover, workers do not own the means of production or society's natural resources and therefore are not in a position to bar other human beings from having access to them.
32. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:186.
33. For this reason among others, we ought to heed Bob Cannon's warning in his 2015 essay "Marx, Modernity and Human Rights," that "in rendering human rights a bourgeois phenomenon (restricted to exchange), Marxists risk colluding with capitalism's defenders in thwarting the critical potential of human rights" (168).
34. Marx and Engels, *The Critique of German Ideology*, MECW, 5:323.

35. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:186.
36. Brenkert, *Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, 89.
37. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, 323. Emphasis mine.
38. Marx, "Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right,'" 142. Emphasis mine.
39. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 121.
40. Husami, "Marx on Distributive Justice," 36.
- p. 267 41. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87.
42. Elsewhere, to support this view, Wood deploys reasoning that Ziyad Husami described as "bogus" in a 1978 reply to Wood's 1972 paper "The Marxian Critique of Justice." Husami argues that Wood relies overly much on a single ironic aside in *Capital* to the effect that the exploitation of labor power is "by no means in injustice to the seller"—the seller of labor power being, of course, the worker.
43. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87.
44. Wood, *Karl Marx*.
45. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:654.
46. William McBride also takes up this question—at least as regards Wood and also Robert Tucker—in his 1975 essay "The Concept of Justice in Marx, Engels, and Others." McBride largely explains it as a consequence of Wood et al. having distinguished too little between Engels's views on the matter, and Marx's. This is not the focus of my criticism here, but it bears consideration and McBride's article offers a compelling discussion of areas where their views on justice may have differed.
47. Luxemburg, "Reform or Revolution" in *The Rosa-Luxemburg Reader*, 151.
48. Shoikhedbrod, *Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberalism*, 88.
49. Shoikhedbrod, *Revisiting Marx's Critique of Liberalism*, 87.
50. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 113.
51. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 217.
52. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 228.
53. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:583.
54. Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 79.

## Chapter 8

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1. Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," MECW 9:228.
2. 1 John 2:15–17, English Standard Version
3. Marx, "The Power of Money," MECW 3:326.
4. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:175.
5. My translation from the German, "Das religiöse Elend ist in einem der Ausdruck des wirklichen Elendes und in einem die Protestation gegen das wirkliche Elend. Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüt einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist" (Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels—Werke (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin. Band 1. Berlin/DDR. 1976, 378). The English translation in the MECW reads, "Religious distress is at the same

time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:175).

6. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:175.
- p. 268 7. Marx, *Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:182.
8. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:168.
9. Marx, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:170.
10. Chourineur’s transformation into a “moral being” (MECW 4:163). He becomes dog-like toward his new master, Rudolphe, even going so far as to say that “Je me sens pour vous, comme qui dirait l’attachement d’un bouledogue pour son maître” (MECW 4:164). Szeliga describes this transformation as the restoration of Chourineur to mankind, but really, he has become little more than what Marx refers to as a “moral bulldog.”
11. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:170.
12. Brown, “Marx and the Foundations of the Critical Theory of Morality and Ethics,” 10.
13. Brown, “Marx and the Foundations of the Critical Theory of Morality and Ethics,” 16.
14. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:170.
15. It is worth noting that this article is written in September 1847, after Marx’s and Engels’s preparation of the manuscripts that form *The Critique of the German Ideology* and around the time he is supposed by some to have abandoned moral criticism. Yet when Marx condemns Christianity for having justified the “vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed,” this is a clear *ethical* critique of Christianity, as well as an indication of what values a revolutionary and liberating ethical vision would encourage, namely “courage, self-confidence, and pride.”
16. Marx, *The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter*, MECW 6:231.
17. Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, MECW 3:176.
18. Wills, “Marx.”
19. From Marx’s early poem, “On Hegel,” written prior to 1837 (Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Hb. 2, 1929). In English, the text reads, “Kant and Fichte soar to the aether gladly/ Searching for a distant land/ But I only seek to grasp properly/ What I found on the street!” (my translation).
20. For more about this, see MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, Blackledge’s *Marxism and Ethics*, and Gregson’s *Marxism, Ethics, and Politics*.
- p. 269 21. I do tend to think of Kant as the second of these two options, but the point is not of special relevance here, so I leave it to the side. For more about the historiographical point, one may turn to Rudiger Bubner’s *German Idealist Philosophy* where Bubner writes, “Though we have grown accustomed to calling [‘the period delimited by the names of Kant and Hegel’] ‘German Idealism,’ this label is not altogether well chosen and is only partly valid in the case of Kant” (ix). The point is also made in Brian O’Connor’s and Georg Mohr’s 2006 anthology of writings in the German Idealist tradition. In the introduction to this volume, they write, “Kant might be seen to occupy the position of the philosopher who ends one epoch (rationalism, empiricism, enlightenment) and smoothes the way for a new ‘critical’ philosophy, which in its turn becomes the key reference point for the following generations of philosophers. . . . Kant’s successors believed that his framework needed to be superseded in order to bring about what they regarded as the ‘consistent realisation’ of Kantian discoveries. But in so doing they departed ultimately from the basis of Kant’s philosophy. . . . All of this would suggest that Kant is neither explicitly nor implicitly (in terms of ↳ philosophical ambition) compatible with the post-Kantian direction of thought, designated as German Idealism, which Kant himself had nevertheless stimulated” (1–2).
22. Marx wrote, in the Afterword to the 1873 second German edition of *Capital*, “The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (MECW 35:19–20).

23. See Gordon Brittan's 1978 essay "Kant and Newton" for further elaboration of Kant's relationship to Newton and of his response to the challenge presented by Hume's Problem of Induction. There, Brittan outlines the history of the philosophical engagement and argues that while Kant's philosophy does not depend upon the truth of Newtonian physics, it is best understood as an attempt to develop a metaphysics that is *compatible* with Newton's laws. Also useful here is the background provided in Sheldon Smith's 2017 essay "Kant's Foundations for Newtonian Science."
24. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 52.
25. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 41.
26. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 42.
27. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 38.
28. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 43.
29. Booth, "The Limits of Autonomy: Karl Marx's Kant Critique," 249.
30. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:193–194.
31. Booth, "The Limits of Autonomy: Karl Marx's Kant Critique," 251.
32. Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 15. Kain aims to show that Marx's moral outlook in his early work is broadly Kantian. He writes, "I hope to show that in many ways Kant and Marx agree and that in a very significant sense Marx is Kantian in his use of the categorical imperative."
33. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:193.
34. Kant has been defended against the first sort of criticism that Marx makes: that Kantian morality is concerned only with the good will and not with actual outcomes. John Stuart Mill, R. M. Hare, and David Gauthier are three notable commentators who have argued that the universalization principle amounts to consequentialism, in the end, since to ask whether or not a particular moral principle can be universalized is, these authors argue, just to ask what the consequences of such a moral principle would be.  
 I don't find this consequentialist reading of Kant very convincing. For one thing, it requires a great deal of doubt in Kant's own descriptions of his moral theory, as he seems to go to great pains to make it crystal clear that on his view, morality is not about ends or results, but rather purely focused on the self-determination of the autonomous will. This point is by no means decisive for rejecting the consequentialist reading of Kant, because he might have been wrong about the implications of the moral theory he developed. Still, I mention this issue because it is one that makes it *prima facie* more difficult to accept the consequentialist reading of Kant.  
 More significant, I think, is the fact that this reading seems to shift the meaning of "consequentialism" to an intolerable degree. Consequentialism, I take it, is the view ↪ that for a particular object of moral judgment, its moral goodness or badness depends on the consequences that result from it. Consequentialists might disagree about what types of consequences matter for the moral goodness or badness of the thing in question. But I don't think they can disagree about whether it matters or not that the consequences under consideration are ones that have any likelihood at all of actually happening. Yet on the type of "consequentialism" that these authors attribute to Kant, that notion would be discarded.  
 On Kant's theory, in deciding how I should act, I ask myself, What would transpire if everyone else were compelled to act just as I do, and because I have acted in such and such a way? But of course, that such a state of affairs might obtain is scarcely possible to imagine. The question Kant poses has nothing to do with the real consequences of my actions, and the fact that my individual actions may actually have precious little impact upon social practice has no significance whatsoever for the rightness or wrongness of the act about which I am deliberating. Instead, it is a useful device with which to determine whether the act I am contemplating is in conformity with the Moral Law, which is "the objective principle valid for every rational being," or not. The act turns out to be good or bad not in virtue of its consequences (which may in any case be negligible), but in virtue of its conformity with the Moral Law. So I don't believe that the consequentialist reading of Kant is successful or can defend him from Marx's criticism that his moral theory restricts itself, problematically, to the realm of the ideal, and does not provide a satisfactory treatment of the real outcomes of good or bad wills.
35. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:195.

36. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:329.
37. As an interesting historical note, Terrell Carver and Daniel Bank report, in their 2015 *Political History of the Editions of Marx and Engels's German Ideology Manuscripts*, that Bernstein did not exhibit any particular alacrity in facilitating the publication of the text which gives us our most thorough insight into Marx's and Engels's historical materialist method. Carver and Blank write that near the turn of the nineteenth century,

almost all of the manuscripts that became known as *The German Ideology* were not in the archives of the SPD, but in the hands of Bernstein, who administered the manuscripts and unpublished works of the late Friedrich Engels. . . . According to a statement by David Borisovich Ryazanov (1870–1938), the eventual first publisher and editor of larger sections of *The German Ideology* in 1924/26, “[Franz] Mehring had asked for all the manuscript materials that have become *The German Ideology* from Bernstein but had failed to get them. Bernstein was evasive in his response . . . Ryazanov assumed that political differences between the ‘revisionist’ Bernstein and the more ‘orthodox’ Mehring would have played a role here” (10).

38. Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 7.
39. Broué, *The German Revolution 1917–23*, 18.
40. Kautsky, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, 57–58.
41. Kain, “Aristotle, Kant, and the Ethics of the Young Marx,” 16.
- p. 271 42. Adler, *The Marxist Conception of the State*, 98–99.
43. Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 65–66.
44. Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 83.
45. Love, “Kant After Marx,” 583.
46. Love, “Kant After Marx,” 583.
47. Marx, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:412.
48. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 145.
49. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 145.
50. In fact, Bentham eventually abandoned the Greatest Happiness Principle, for reasons we will investigate here shortly. In an unpublished essay on Utilitarianism, Bentham wrote: “Greatest happiness of the greatest number. Some years have now elapsed since, upon a closer scrutiny, reason, altogether incontestable, was found for discarding this appendage. . . . Be the community in question what it may, divide it into two unequal parts, call one of them the majority, the other minority, layout of the account the feelings of the minority, include in the account no feelings but those of the majority, the result you will find is that of this operation, that to the aggregate stock of the happiness of the community, loss not profit is the result of the operation” (Bentham, “The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number,” in Troyer, *The Classical Utilitarians*).
51. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:413–414.
52. We see this in Wood, of course, with his claim that Marx ultimately has little substantive disagreement with Bentham. Derek P. H. Allen anticipated this view in his 1973 essay “The Utilitarianism of Marx and Engels.” There, he wrote, “the arguments which support [Marx and Engels’] moral judgments are utilitarian in all but name” (189).
53. Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6.
54. Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6.
55. Brenkert, “Marx and Utilitarianism,” 431.
56. Mill, “Utilitarianism,” pg. 257.

57. And, as Michael Green notes in his 1983 essay “Marx, Utility, and Right,” “What is wrong with the shopkeeper’s view of utility is that one’s very human abilities are considered merely as means to be exchanged for so many units of pleasure, satisfaction, or utility. Thus, each individual ‘treats other men as means’” (434).
58. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:605.
59. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:606.
60. Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6.
61. Of course, when in developed countries such as the US, roughly 1% of the population controls nearly 80% of the wealth, it would be hard to argue that the distribution of this wealth across a wider layer of society would not significantly increase the standard of living of an enormous number of people. But that is slightly beside the point, here.
62. Hart, “Bentham and the Demystification of the Law,” 2–17.
63. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:65, Note 65.
64. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 145.
65. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:409.
- p. 272 66. From “Excerpt on the Phrase ‘Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number,’” in Troyer, *The Classical Utilitarians*, 93.
67. Wood, *Karl Marx*, 145.
68. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:606.
69. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 32:274.
70. Marx, “Transformation of Money into Capital,” MECW 30:158.
71. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:606, Note 67.
72. This, even though of course Marx would point out that the current relations *are* just at least according to the tenets of capitalist justice.
73. Duncan, *Marx and Mill*, 295.
74. For a thorough accounting of Marx’s engagements with Mill’s ideas, see Michael Evans, “John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx.”
75. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, 110.
76. In a draft of an article Marx was preparing for publication, he writes: “This much is however certain: the Americans, and particularly the poor workers in the large towns of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, etc., have taken the matter to their hearts and founded a large number of societies for the establishment of such colonies, and all the time new communities are being set up. The Americans are tired of continuing as the slaves of the few rich men who feed on the labour of the people; and it is obvious that with the great energy and endurance of this nation, community of goods will soon be introduced over a significant part of their country. However, it is not just in America but in England too that attempts have been made to realise community of goods. Here the philanthropist *Robert Owen* has been preaching this ideal for thirty years, he has sunk the whole of his large fortune in it and given everything he had in order to found the present colony at *Harmony in Hampshire*” (MECW 4:223).
77. Marx, “Proudhon,” MECW 8:554.
78. “*Niederträchtigkeit*,” in Marx’s German; Marx, “Wages,” MECW 6:428.
79. Marx, “Wages,” MECW 6:433.
80. Marx, “Wages,” MECW 6:433.



## Chapter 9

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1. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:186.
2. Marx and Engels, "Circular Against Kriege," MECW 6:45.
3. Marx and Engels, "Circular Against Kriege," MECW 6:49.
4. Marx and Engels, "Circular Against Kriege," MECW 6:49.
5. Marx and Engels, "Circular Against Kriege," MECW 6:46.
6. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, MECW 5:213.
7. Kandiyali, "The Importance of Others," 573.
8. I discuss this further in my 2019 essay "Towards a Concept of Revolutionary Admiration."
- p. 273 9. The German term translated as "morality" in prominent English-language translations of the *Manifesto* is "*die Moral*," which typically carries the connotation of a system of moral commands.
10. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:504; The German word translated as "abolish" here is "abschaffen," which connotes a more complete doing-away-with than the German word "aufheben," which is also sometimes translated as "to abolish."
11. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:504.
12. One might wonder whether Marx speaks with tongue firmly in cheek when he accepts the charge that communists seek to abolish the institution of the family. But as Richard Weikart writes in his 1994 essay "Marx, Engels, and the Abolition of the Family": "While Marx once alluded to a higher form of the family in communist society, he and Engels usually wrote about the destruction, dissolution, and abolition of the family. The relationships they envisaged for communist society would have little or no resemblance to the family as it existed in nineteenth-century Europe or indeed anywhere else. Thus it is certainly appropriate to define their position as the abolition of the family. Only by making the term family almost infinitely elastic can they be said to have embraced merely a reformulation of the family" (658). See also Sophie Lewis's *Abolish the Family*. M. E. O'Brien explores similar themes in her book *Family Abolition*.
13. Hudis, "The Ethical Implications of Marx's Concept of a Post-Capitalist Society," 346.
14. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:497.
15. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:502–503.
16. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:499.
17. Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:506.
18. Another proffered alternative is worth considering, but less likely and compelling. It is that people would continue to engage in forms of discourse that look awfully like the kind of thing that happens today in seminars and conferences about normative moral theory. However, it could be that such reasoning would not be properly "moral," just because in a nonexploitative society, that reasoning would of course not serve the role of grappling with actually existing exploitative social relations. Perhaps, since contingently, nothing in a fully developed communist society could be moral theory because it would have no subject matter to be about, such discourse would be more akin to a historical anthropology of past circumstances and moralities. It would be a little like attempting to go on doing film criticism in a world in which films had existed a very long time ago, but no one alive had seen one.
19. Only heuristically, because the world as it ought to be is not siloed away in some far-off utopian future. It is *already*

present, albeit in a process of Becoming which exists materially as the proletariat's ever-present struggle for emancipation. This is why, as Marx puts it, communists do not "preach morality" to the workers' movement. The proletariat is the new world present in the old, struggling to transform Being in its own image—an image of free, active, fully realized humanity, which itself comes into clearer view in direct proportion as the world from which the proletariat emerges is overcome.

- p. 274 20. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:36.
21. In *Hegel on Second Nature and Ethical Life*, Andreja Novakovic writes that Hegel is to be understood as arguing that in *Sittlichkeit*, "true conscience is no longer engaged in deriving objective content through its own resources or testing what is publicly recognized against the measure of its subjective convictions. Its particular duties are prescribed by its specific position within the social order and it is committed to the requirements internal to its roles. So in an objectively rational social order the basic tension between social expectations and particular commitment is (for the most part) overcome, since I form my commitments within the context of institutional roles" (41–42). Novakovic's characterization elegantly expresses that human beings in conditions of ethical life are not passive, automatic beings; they are rational, free, and active individuals who subjectively embrace their role expectations precisely because these expectations emerge from social arrangements that are themselves rationally ordered.
22. Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life*, 240.
23. Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 6.
24. In his, "Marx's Sketch of Communist Society in *The German Ideology*," Furner argues for the centrality of the "critical critic" sketch in Marx's and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology*, as well as for the appropriateness of attributing this sketch to Marx rather than dismissing it as an addition from Engels that Marx would have preferred to omit. Furner writes, "The abolition of occupational confinement provides an argument for communism on grounds of individual autonomy, while the disappearance of occupational identity would permit life-activity a more universal and more individual form of recognition" (211).
25. Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:47. In his 2011 paper regarding this passage's importance and its relation to the rest of Marx's thought, James Furner challenges Terrell Carver's earlier contention that the sketch is a humorous aside revealing not much, if anything, about Marx's vision for a communist society. Far from being a few throwaway lines, Furner rightly concludes of this passage, "The abolition of occupational confinement provides an argument for communism on grounds of individual autonomy, while the disappearance of occupational identity would permit life-activity a more universal and more individual form of recognition" ("Marx's Sketch of Communist Society," 211).
26. Groff, "Aristotelian Marxism/Marxist Aristotelianism," 785.
27. Marx continues, "This theory came to the fore with Hobbes and Locke, at the same time as the first and second English revolutions, those first battles by which the bourgeoisie won political power. It is to be found even earlier, of course, among writers on political economy, as a tacit presupposition. Political economy is the real science of this theory of utility; it acquires its true content among the Physiocrats, since they were the first to treat political economy systematically. In Helvétius and Holbach one can already find an idealization of this doctrine, which fully corresponds to the attitude of opposition adopted by the French bourgeoisie before the revolution. Holbach depicts the entire activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e.g., speech, ↳ love, etc., as a relation of utility and utilization. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love, definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning *peculiar* to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the *relation of utility or utilization*. This *paraphrasing* ceases to be meaningless and arbitrary only when these relations have validity for the individual not on their own account, not as spontaneous activity, but rather as disguises, though by no means disguises of the category of Utilisation, but of an actual third aim and relation which is called the relation of utility." (Marx and Engels, "Saint Max" in *The Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:409.)
- p. 275 28. Marx, "Private Property and Labor," MECW 3:300.
29. Marx, "Private Property and Labor," MECW 3:300.
30. Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, 58. Excerpts from Marx's translation, along with his notes and

marginalia thereon, are included in the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*.

31. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 424a: 17–26.
32. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 417a.
33. Aristotle, *De Anima*, II.11.
34. Hegel, *Lectures in History of Philosophy*, 189.
35. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, 191–192.
36. In his essay “Aristotle’s *De Anima* and Marx’s Theory of Man,” David Depew writes, summarizing Marx’s critique of Hegel’s reading: “Just as worker and capitalist are captured in private and isolated worlds over against which objects seem external, abstract and not one’s own, so too the modern intellectual is trapped in a world of abstract, private, and ungrounded conceptions which only problematically gain access and reference to trans-subjective reality” (177).
37. Pickford, “*Poiêsis, Praxis, Aisthesis*,” 40–41.
38. Marx’s early manuscripts suggest that when humans’ alienation from their own creative powers is overcome—a process which can occur only through human appropriation and transformation of the external world, such that the separation between subject and object is overcome—the approach to what we think of now as moral questions might be somewhat akin to the kind of moral particularism described in John McDowell’s 1979 essay “Virtue and Reason.” There, McDowell describes an approach to moral questions that is best analogized to a special sort of vision. Virtue, McDowell argues, is not a kind of moral knowledge, but rather, “a disposition (perhaps of a specially rational and self-conscious kind) to behave rightly; the nature of virtue is explained, as it were, from the outside in” (331). McDowell goes on to recommend that we “give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life” (341).
39. Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” MECW 3:302.
40. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:81–82.
41. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:83.
- p. 276 42. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:89–91.
43. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 90–91.
44. We might also be reminded again of Marx’s and Engels’s earlier insistence that “for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution.” Marx and Engels, *Critique of the German Ideology*, MECW 5:52.
45. In this way, as in others, the class position of workers under capitalism hints at the universal condition for emancipated human beings in developed communism.
46. In his 2021 book *Communism, Political Power, and Freedom in Marx*, Levy del Aguila Marchena argues that it is a weakness of Marx’s view not to constitute an even *more* radical break with bourgeois theory. Speaking here of Marx’s related views on the abolition of politics as a feature of human life in the transition to communism, del Aguila Marchena writes, “Marx here subscribes to a variety of the fetishistic commitment of the bourgeois horizon in his understanding of the political reduced to technique: the fetishism of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market gives way here to the fetishism of the ‘communist technique’ which should be able to deal with the management of the common” (136). The plausibility of del Aguila Marchena’s critique seems to turn on the question of what constitutes fetishism and it’s worth noting that a “hand” and a “technique” are things of two entirely different kinds. The fetishistic character of ideology that represents economic developments as actions taken by the “invisible hand of the market” lies in its obscuring the reality that it is not any invisible hand acting upon us, but in fact *ourselves* as human beings acting upon our own social reality, that gives rise to economic developments. The agency we imputed to that “invisible hand” was always in fact our own. There can be no parallel drawn here with what del Aguila Marchena calls “communist technique” or what Engels might have called, “the administration of things,” to be contrasted with “the government of man.” It is not the unique, “fetishized” capacity of any anointed technique that accounts for the

reconciliation of social antagonisms in communist society. Rather, it is the production of the human species as a universal subject, a process that is the task of revolutionary change. This task does not bring about the end of all disagreement or conflict. What it does away with is the domination of one part of society over another, so that confronting the challenges of human life is not a matter of one part of society opposing itself to another, but rather of genuinely democratic deliberation about how to address the needs of all.

47. Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:264.
48. In *Capital*, Marx says of labor, “The labour process . . . is human action with a view to the production of use values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase” (MECW 29:194).
49. Marx, “Human Requirements and the Division of Labour Under the Rule of Private Property,” MECW 3:314. For a detailed discussion of the connections between Marx’s abolitionism and Kant’s ethics, see Lea Ypi’s 2017 essay “From Revelation to Revolution.”

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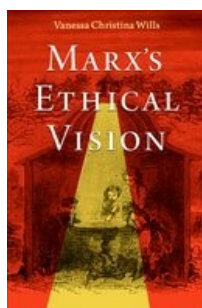
## Chapter 10

1. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:490.
2. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:91.
3. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 35:530.
4. Marx, *Capital*, MECW 37:92.
5. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:92.
6. Marx, *Grundrisse*, MECW 29:92.
7. As pandemic illness, climate catastrophe, and food insecurity all threaten humanity, our current moment highlights the indispensability of Marx’s approach to understanding our historical relationship to nature. As George Henderson and Eric Sheppard argue in their 2006 “Marx and the Spirit of Marx,” “Our contemporary world, where climate, ecosystems, organisms and the landscape are profoundly reshaped by human activities, certainly is one where almost all aspects of nature have been transformed. Yet nature is also shaped by biophysical processes that continually break out of the boxes into which humans seek to cram nature (think of global warming, or mad cow disease), biting back in ways that show how second nature remains crucial to social life, and always partially beyond the control of capitalism. This ongoing, complex and interdependent relationship between societal and biophysical processes is well captured by applying Marx’s favored dialectical analysis” (59).
8. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, MECW 5:5.

## Coda

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- p. 278
1. It is worth noting the entirety of the Regents' September 19, 1969 resolution: "Whereas, on October 11, 1940, the Regents adopted a Resolution stating that 'membership in the Communist Party is incompatible with membership in the faculty of a State University'; and Whereas, on June 24, 1949, The Regents reaffirmed and amplified that policy with a resolution stating, in part, 'pursuant to this policy, the Regents direct that no member of the Communist Party shall be employed by the University'; and Whereas, in an action reported March 22, 1950, the Academic Senate, Northern and Southern Sections, concurred in the foregoing policy by adopting a resolution that proved members of the Communist Party are not acceptable as members of the faculty; and Whereas, on April 21, 1950, The Regents adopted a Resolution confirming and emphasizing their policy statements of October 11, 1940, and June 24, 1949; and Whereas, it has been reported to the Regents that Angela Y. Davis was recently appointed as a member of the University faculty, and subsequently she informed the University Administration by letter, stating, among other things, that she is a member of the Communist Party; Now, Therefore, The Regents direct the President to take steps to terminate Miss Davis' University appointment in accordance with regular procedures as prescribed in the Standing Orders of The Regents" ("Statement Issued by Regent Higgs" in *University Bulletin: A Weekly Bulletin for the Staff of the University of California*.)
  2. "U.C.L.A. Barred from Pressing Red's Ouster," *New York Times*, October 21, 1969, 35.
  3. See also Daniel Gordon, "The Firing of Angela Davis at UCLA, 1969–1970."
  4. For more on the California Oath Controversy, see John McCumber's 2016 book *The Philosophy Scare*. See also David P. Gardner's 1969 "By Oath and Association."



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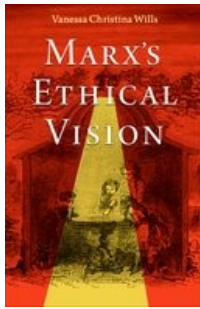
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