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Karl Marx on Human Flourishing and Proletarian Ethics

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Karl Marx on Human Flourishing and Proletarian Ethics

by

Samuel Badger

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Philosophy
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Sulis Tlalli Badger, and to Mary Ann Walkley who died too soon.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Introduction: Marx’s working-class ethics of human flourishing.....	1
Meta-ethics and normativity.....	3
Justice.....	6
Flourishing	7
Historicism and morality in Marx’s thinking	8
Chapter 1 Summary – The Question of Marx’s Moral Philosophy.....	9
Chapter 2 Summary – Alienation and the Humanist Ontology of Marx’s Early Works	10
Chapter 3 Summary – The Ontology of Capital, the Commodity Fetish, and its Humanist Themes	13
Chapter 4 Summary – The Working Day, Human Development, and the Flourishing Thesis in Marx’s <i>Capital</i>	15
Chapter 5 Summary – The Meta-Ethics of Marx and Engels.....	18
Chapter 1: The Question of Marx’s Moral Philosophy.....	22
Eugene Kamenka and the question of Marx and ethics	23
The non-moral reading of Marx.....	26
R.C. Tucker and Allen Wood, and morality as class interest	27
Althusser and the critique of humanist ideology.....	33
Conclusion – the amoral approach.....	37
The justice reading of Marx	38
G.A. Cohen and the injustice of exploitation	38
Ziyad Husami, Jon Elster and the justice of proletarian indignation.....	43
Conclusion – the justice approach.....	48
The flourishing approach.....	50
Norman Levine, chrematistics and the constitutive subject	50
George McCarthy and the ethics of self-realization	53
Milton Fisk and Aristotelian class relativism	56
Sean Sayers’s theory of human nature	58
Conclusion – the flourishing approach	61
Conclusion.....	62
Chapter 2: Alienation and the Human Condition in the <i>1844 Manuscripts</i>	62
Species-being and Marx’s ontology of humanity.....	65
The origins of species-being – Feuerbach, Hegel, and Aristotle.....	65
Marx’s non-dualist ontology of species-being	69
The production of the object.....	74

The production of the subject	76
The production of the world, and world as universal body.....	78
The four types of capitalist alienation.....	80
Alienation, human flourishing, and ethics	83
The development and deformation of human needs	83
Human flourishing in the <i>1844 Manuscripts</i>	84
The passage on money and corrupted flourishing	86
Truly human bonds.....	92
Marx’s critique of moralism and his ethics of alienation	94
The Marxist conception of human nature vs the Aristotelian conception.....	103
Marx’s notion of social phronesis	109
Conclusion	112
Chapter 3: The Ontology of <i>Capital</i> , the Commodity Fetish and its Humanist	
Themes.....	114
The dialectical method of <i>Capital</i>	116
The ontology of the commodity in <i>Capital</i>	118
The two theories of value and the commodity fetish.....	119
Capital, surplus value and exploitation	127
The critique of chrematistics	130
The social ontology of human nature in <i>Capital</i>	134
The theory of human nature and labor in <i>Capital</i>	134
Cooperation	139
Class and class struggle.....	143
Conclusion.....	147
Chapter 4: The Working Day, Human Development, and the Flourishing Thesis	
in Marx’s <i>Capital</i>	148
The proletariat and class standpoint	150
The standpoints of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie	153
The working day.....	153
The struggle over the working day and the ethics of productive time	162
The reserve army of labor	166
Working conditions.....	169
The surplus population, the “general law of capitalist accumulation,”	
and the production of human misery.....	173
The non-moral reading – mechanics and ideology.....	177
The chapter on machines, maldevelopment, and the positive theory of	
human development.....	184
Machines and human maldevelopment under capitalism	184
The development of fully human subjects.....	190
The juxtaposition of existing conditions and the future system	193
Conclusion.....	199
Chapter 5: The Meta-Ethics of Marx and Engels.....	201
Dühring and <i>Anti-Dühring</i> – Engels on ethics	203
Engels’s rejection of transcendent morality	204

Equality	215
Potential problems for class relativism	222
Class relativism, objectivity, and moral realism.....	222
Reconciling historicism and human flourishing	228
The evolution of class morality	229
The good life and class morality in <i>Origin of the Family, Private</i> <i>Property and the State</i>	233
Is “class standpoint” a sufficient basis for ethics?	235
Critique of the Gotha Program.....	237
Marx on “fair distribution,” and the evolving ethics of production and distribution	237
The workers as a collective agent.....	242
Irony and hypocrisy in the bourgeois and proletarian standpoints.....	243
The ironic character of bourgeois morality	244
From irony to hypocrisy.....	247
Conclusion – the flourishing approach and class ethics	250
Chapter 6: Conclusion	253
Systematizing Marx’s ethics	254
Meta-ethics of class.....	254
The working day and the soundness of the proletarian standpoint.....	256
Human nature and progressive holism	258
The limitations of Marx’s ethics and the 20 th century.....	259
The crisis in Marxism.....	260
Sigmund Freud and the significance of critical theory	264
The limits of internationalism	266
The domination of the workers and Antonio Gramsci’s proletarian culture.....	269
Conclusion.....	272
Works Cited	275

Abstract

This dissertation will show that Marx's philosophy contains a notion of human "second nature" centered on the activity of labor with a corresponding class-centered theory of flourishing and emancipation. This notion shares important similarities with that of Aristotle but also differs in significant ways. Second nature for Marx is created and habituated through education and social labor. Moreover, human nature is molded into different forms as history progresses and modes and means of production change. In a class society everyone becomes is alienated from their nature in a way that inhibits their flourishing. This contrasts with an emancipated society, where people are free to develop their nature in accordance with their interests as social individuals. Marx's conception rests on a notion of species-being he gains from Feuerbach, but he goes beyond Feuerbach in historicizing human nature.

For Marx and Engels, second nature comes to reflect the class divisions inherent in each society. Every class has its own moral standpoint which emerges out of the interests, practices, social relations and ways of life of that class. Thus, Marx and Engels have a relativist view of ethics where multiple ethical systems coexist and have their own models of justification. I show that Marx and Engels are still moral realists despite their relativistic and sociological account of morality insofar as every class morality is beset by internal contradictions and external tensions that undermine it, and insofar as every class morality successfully addresses some limitations on human flourishing. Moreover,

they believe that class morality will be superseded by a truly human morality only fully knowable to those who have been socialized within it.

The division in class morality is displayed in Marx's analysis of the working day. I show how in *Capital*, two distinct moral standpoints are given voices by Marx to explain their reasoning on the length of the working day. The bourgeois standpoint validates the morality of free exchange, while the proletarian standpoint argues for fair compensation for their labor and sufficient free time for rest and happiness. These two standpoints are never entirely commensurate, but Marx also shows how the working-class standpoint grasps the real barriers to human flourishing, unlike the capitalist standpoint. This shows both how Marx is a relativist insofar as he recognizes the validity of two distinct moral standpoints, and how he is a realist insofar as he sees one morality as more internally consistent and capable of grasping the material conditions of the time. The ultimate ends of working class morality is a model of education that edifies everyone in a plurality of ways, an equitable distribution of work responsibilities, the use of technology to reduce the psychological and physical burdens of labor, and sufficient free time from tedious forms of labor.

Introduction: Marx's Working-Class Ethics of Human Flourishing

This dissertation will argue that Marx has an ethics of human flourishing that resembles but diverges in significant ways from Aristotle's ethics — as much as Marx puts Hegel on his feet, he puts Aristotle among the toiling masses instead of the social elite. For Aristotle, it is precisely the privilege of the elite that allows them to achieve virtue and flourishing, as can be seen with his theory of natural slaves or his notion of contemplative leisure (enabled by said slaves) as the activity most appropriate for human flourishing. While Aristotle argues that only the contemplative Aristocrat achieves true virtue and eudaimonia, and that the slave necessarily remains at a lower state of development, Hegel inverts this by associating the slave with virtue and freedom through their practical activity while the Aristocrat becomes increasingly dependent on the slave. The notion of *Bildung* offered in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic is echoed by Marx's characterization of the working class under capitalism. My dissertation will show how Marx marries Hegel's dialectics to Aristotle's naturalistic character-based ethics to understand the positive historical potential of exploited classes to change themselves and their world. I also show that Marx's notion of human flourishing is grounded on an ontology of human nature which shares the holism of Aristotle's theory but historicizes it and makes it dynamic. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx articulates a theory of human nature from the unique way in which we work socially upon our world, thereby transmuting ourselves as well as our world, and derives his notion of flourishing from that. In his later work, Marx does not abandon this notion of human nature or of flourishing as is suggested by Althusser, so much as he gives it new empirical detail.

For Marx, labor is the basic activity of human beings and ought to be an edifying and rewarding one. Alienation makes labor into a burden, thereby inhibiting human flourishing. Though his ideas of alienation are rooted in the philosophies of Hegel and Feuerbach, Marx alters it by making it a consequence of economic relations. As opposed to alienation, there is the emancipated human condition where people are enriched with new capacities and needs through their work and find satisfaction in meeting these needs. This notion of flourishing underpins Marx's later analysis of working conditions in *Capital*. Though he does not use the language of alienation as frequently as in his early works, Marx details how the worker's alienation from the working process inhibits their health, happiness and personal development. The most immediate problem facing the working class is the loss of control over the working day. In Marx's analysis of the working day, we can see how the working class's concern with their flourishing motivates a movement to limit the work week and improve working conditions among the workers themselves.

The meta-ethics of Marx and Engels is detailed in Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, though it also appears implicitly in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* and *Capital*, as well as Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Marx and Engels argue that morality is a historically contingent social phenomenon that evolves with the development of productive capacity and class relations. The class structure of society leads to different standpoints on morality which are never entirely commensurate. Moral standpoints come out of the values, interests and social practices of specific classes, and how they are accustomed to striving towards human flourishing. Marx and Engels think that a class morality is most progressive when it first appears as it grasps real human needs better than the norms and values of more established classes.

Speaking from the standpoint of proletarian morality, Marx and Engels can accurately diagnose the problems with bourgeois morality. However, class moralities always have some fundamental contradictions from their outset. Marx acknowledges the existence of contradictions within the proletarian moral standpoint in his “Critique of the Gotha Program”, however these contradictions are resolved by the proletariat itself. The unique aspect of Proletarian morality is that its core value is the negation of class itself, which makes a truly universal morality possible.

Meta-ethics and normativity

There are two deeply related questions which this dissertation will address. There is the meta-ethical question of what Marx thought morality was and whether or how morality is real or illusory, and the normative question of what Marx thought was moral or what ought people to do.¹ As Marx did not gift us with his own explicit definition of morality, how we answer these questions depends in part on how narrowly we define moral normativity. Not long before Marx was born, Kant gave a narrow definition of morality where moral principles are absolute principles of action derived from reason:

Everyone must admit that if a law is to have moral force, i.e., to be the basis of an obligation, it must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the precept, "Thou shalt not lie," is not valid for men alone, as if other rational beings had no need to observe it; and so with all the other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the basis of obligation must not be sought in the nature of man, or in the circumstances in the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in the conception of pure reason; and although any other precept which is founded on principles of mere

¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, the terms “ethics” and “morality” will be used as synonyms. These two terms have shared etymological origins in Greek and Latin respectively, but have evolved into sometimes-distinct terms. Morality is often used to refer either to absolute and intrinsic justice (as with natural law theory or deontology) or as a kind of sociological designation (Catholic morality, Islamic morality, etc) while ethics is more rooted in notions of right and wrong derived from a set of intrinsic values. Notably, Hegel uses the distinction between ethics and morality in a philosophically meaningful way in his *Philosophy of Right*. However, such a fine grain semantic distinction adds nothing of value to the question of whether Marx’s philosophy contains a normative dimension.

experience may be in certain respects universal, yet in as far as it rests even in the least degree on an empirical basis, perhaps only as to a motive, such a precept, while it may be a practical rule, can never be called a moral law (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*,)

If we hold such a narrow definition of morality, then we can end the dissertation here and state that Marx is a moral nihilist. However, this definition would also exclude much of the Aristotelian moral tradition, as well as many other moral theories from before the enlightenment. Aristotelians for instance do not derive morality from *a priori* reason but from human nature. This dissertation will define ethical normativity as rules or values that have intrinsic goodness or value, authority over merely instrumental norms, and the ability to derive judgements about what one *ought* to do. This broader criterion can capture both axiomatic notions of morality like Kant's, but also notions of morality that emerge from natural or material processes like Aristotle's and Marx's.

As a social phenomenon, Marx understood morality as a real cultural and historical force which played an important ideological function. In his early writings, we can see how Marx was influenced by Hegel and his *Philosophy of Right*, where the ethical life (or *Sittlichkeit*) is a social and historical phenomenon that sets the conditions for a good life within a society. Kant's *a priori* notion of morality is critiqued by Hegel as ultimately empty, and it is sublated within the notion of the ethical life. The ethical life is realized in the state which not only confronts the individual, the family and civil society as an external authority, but also incorporates the interests and capacities of all individuals into a general purpose.² In his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Marx argues that different classes (or "estates" in the earlier parlance of Hegel) have different moral standpoints that remain at odds instead of being reconciled into the state.³ This

² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, paragraph 155

³ *MECW Volume III*, 185-186

idea will recur later in his philosophy as aristocratic and bourgeois notions of morality, justice, right and the good life become objects of criticism. As an object of critique, Marx could hold that morality was a real social phenomenon without himself making any normative claims. Morality exists as a set of rules that members of some class or institution *think* we ought to follow, but that does not mean we really ought to follow it. This is an important part of the arguments of both Wood and Althusser against Marx having a moral view. The ruling class understands theft as immoral regardless of its impact on the victim because property rights have been violated, however that does not mean one *ought* to follow this norm and not steal. This was a question Marx confronted in his early career as a journalist when the German Junkers denied the right of peasants to collect firewood as the forests were legally property of the aristocrats.⁴ In this sense, one might suppose, as Althusser, Tucker and Wood argue, that Marx thought morality was an important social phenomenon to critique but held no normative views of his own. The assumption implicit in such an interpretation is that in rejecting bourgeois and aristocratic morality, as well as the philosophical foundations on which those moral systems stood, Marx also rejected all forms of morality as philosophically justified.

Though Marx does explicitly reject and critique bourgeois notions of justice, he does frequently support proletarian notions of morality. He does not categorically defend every moral claim made by the exploited classes. For example, Marx critiques the methods and implicit theoretical assumptions of the Luddites. The Luddites were former skilled craftsmen cast either into unemployment or into the growing proletariat by the loss of their weaving business. Driven into poverty as new productive techniques

⁴ Marx, "Debates on Law on Theft of Wood", 1842, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*

made their (formerly valuable) skills redundant, they blamed the machines for their poor circumstances and attacked them. However, if the Luddites themselves controlled those machines, they could reduce their workload while producing more and still employing everyone. We will see Marx explicitly support the demand for a shorter working day from the standpoint of the workers. Unlike the attack on the machines, shortening the working day serves to emancipate the workers and further their development. This is because free time will allow for more rest and personal improvement and because the workers as a class come to understand their power over their own conditions.

Justice

Broadly, my dissertation uses the term justice to refer to action that is in accordance with a moral principle regarding what one is owed. To act unjustly, conversely, is to act contrary to the principle. Marx is primarily concerned with questions of distributive justice as opposed to corrective justice, for instance in his critique of the capitalist notion of exchange. One might take the notion of exploitation found in Marx's *Capital* to argue that exploitation is an injustice to the worker because exploitation violates core principles of how people ought to interact with one another. The question of whether Marx himself thinks "exploitation" is an injustice is a matter of debate as we shall see. Some parts of *Capital* certainly suggest he thinks exploitation is contrary to distributive justice, though others like Wood argue otherwise. However, one consistent concern Marx has with the notion of justice is that it tends to reify contemporary moral ideas that are historically contingent. These principles have historical origins, but the original reasons which caused them to come into being are long forgotten. Yet the "Critique of the Gotha Program" argues that such principles of

justice have a normative function despite their historically conditional nature as the politically emancipated working-class transitions between two notions of distributive justice.

Flourishing

The other major normative notion discussed in the text is human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. Though this is often understood as a distinctly Aristotelian conception of the Good, similar concepts can be found among the Epicureans, Stoics, Skeptics, Cynics, Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists, and other schools of ancient philosophy. Notably, flourishing is understood best as a holistic notion of the good which is not reducible to a particular dimension of human existence. This differentiates human flourishing from the good in utilitarianism. In utilitarian philosophy, utility is understood as pleasure and the negation of pain.⁵ Aristotle argues that though pleasure is generally associated with flourishing, we cannot reduce flourishing to pleasure as some bad or harmful acts are pleasurable while some virtuous acts are inconvenient and painful.⁶ Instead, for Aristotle human flourishing comes out of a life of virtue and leisure, and this entails a combination of factors such as wisdom, pleasure, wealth, friendship and honor. Contemplative leisure is the activity most associated with happiness, though Aristotle also associates a lower degree of happiness with virtuous action and politics.⁷ Marx has a similar notion to human flourishing that runs through his texts, although it privileges “emancipated labor” over contemplation instead of privileging contemplation over “virtuous action”. Consequently, while Aristotle gives a uniquely Aristocratic notion of

⁵ Jeremy Bentham, 11

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X chapter vii

⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X chapter viii

human flourishing, Marx defends a notion of flourishing that is accessible to all under emancipated social conditions.

Historicism and morality in Marx's thinking

One of Marx's most important innovations was his historicist understanding of social and historical development. For Marx, things which other philosophers had traditionally taken to be essential facts of existence are reinterpreted as historical contingencies. These historical contingencies could be understood as moments of a greater totality through a dialectical method. As well as Aristotle, Marx's notion of historical development was influenced by Giambattista Vico, Adam Smith, Hegel, Feuerbach and the Utopian socialists in various ways. The Italian modern philosopher Vico offered an early historicist and scientific account of social development. Adam Smith provided a theory of value, as well as a theory of economic development through the increasing division of labor. Hegel provided a dialectical method through which history could be understood through its unfolding moments. Both Smith and Hegel gave Marx the notion that historical change does not depend on the conscious acts of individuals through their notions of the invisible hand and the cunning of reason respectively. From Feuerbach, Marx gained his notion of species-being, which was his social and materialist understanding of human nature. Finally, from the Utopian Socialists Marx took the idea that we could consciously break from the past and reconstruct society in novel ways. These ideas all influence Marx's philosophical system of dialectical materialism and shape his understanding of ethics as a historical phenomenon that develops with society. We will see their various ideas alongside those of Aristotle in the reading of Marx given in this text.

Chapter 1 Summary – The Question of Marx’s Moral Philosophy and the Ethics of Marxism

The first chapter will review recent scholarship on Marx’s ethics. There are two broad camps, one of which holds that Marx viewed all moral thinking as mere ideology that represents the mundane interests of a ruling class and another which holds that Marx saw socialism as morally superior way of governing society. Those who have a moral view of Marx see his ethics as a critique of the injustice of capitalist distribution or as an Aristotelian notion of flourishing. For the camp which focuses on justice, Marx’s ethics is primarily motivated in the problem of distributive justice and opposition to exploitation and private ownership of the means of production. The camp which focuses on human flourishing, on the other hand, revolves around the question of whether capitalism inhibits the good life. I argue that this third camp comes closest to grasping Marx’s own moral philosophy.

The position that Marx did not have an ethical project is best represented by Louis Althusser, R.C. Tucker, and Allen Wood, which I will call the “Amoral Marx” thesis. They view morality as mere ideology for Marx, and that Marxism is a scientific philosophy of history not an ideology. Althusser cites the distinction between the early humanist Marx who is attempting to overcome his Feuerbachian language, and the late scientific Marx who strives for scientific objectivity, while Wood points to Marx’s view that abstract ideals of justice are merely the ideological chains given to us by the ruling class. In their view, Marx treats ethics merely as a social phenomenon that scientific Marxism must critique.

Those like G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster and Ziyad Husami think that the main ethical problem for Marx is the injustice of exploitation, which I will call the “Justice” thesis. These thinkers do not necessarily disregard the Aristotelian elements in Marx but downplay them in favor of the injustice of exploitation and inequality. I agree that exploitation is a serious ethical problem for Marx, but it troubles him insofar as distributive injustice inhibits human development and the fulfillment of needs. Moreover, a certain level of human development is itself a necessary condition for a society to pursue and sustain distributive justice.

Finally, there are those like George McCarthy, Norman Levine, George Brenkert, Sean Sayers, and Milton Fisk who hold that Marx’s ethics is centered on a notion of human development and flourishing, often in an Aristotelian sense. I will call this the “human flourishing” thesis. They do not dismiss the role of distributive justice but do give it secondary importance to human development, self-realization and flourishing. Though I broadly agree with these thinkers, they do not go far enough in developing Marx’s differences with Aristotle, especially on human nature. Moreover, they do not sufficiently reconcile the class relativism of Marx and Engels with their universal conception of the good in terms of flourishing.

Chapter 2 Summary – Alienation and the Humanist Ontology of Marx’s Early Work

The second chapter will argue that Marx’s notion of species-being defines human nature in terms of the conscious activity of social labor. Human beings are animals who not only work socially but create and share new ways of working and consuming through their labor. Second, this forms the basis for an ethics of flourishing which

distinguishes the sufferings of the alienated subject with the self-actualization of the emancipated subject. This will show that the Flourishing Thesis is the most accurate, though since Wood and Althusser largely rest their view on Marx's later works, their view will not be fully refuted until later chapters.

In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx lays out a theory of human nature as “species-being” that will underpin much of his later thinking. Human nature emerges out of the objective material world in which it finds itself, and through work changes itself as well as its world. This human nature incorporates both the external and internal aspects of human existence. The external element of human nature, which is made possible by its sensuous and productive character, opens it up to the possibility of alienation, as the externalized, objectified aspect of human existence can be appropriated by another. This appropriation presupposes certain social conditions that are themselves the product of human labor, meaning humans effectively create the conditions under which they become alienated. The emancipated human differs from the alienated one in that they actualize themselves through labor, but it is also no longer dominated by an already-alien material nature as “primitive” humanity was prior to class society.

In the manuscript titled “Alienated Labor”, Marx characterizes the human essence in terms of creative social work. He notes that other animals like beavers and bees are socially productive too, but only humans consciously and freely adopt novel standards of success and techniques. Under alienated conditions this is reversed, and one works to sustain physical existence. In another section titled “Needs, Production and the Division of Labor”, Marx relates his discussion of human capacities to needs. Humans produce to realize their needs, both biological and cultural, and all needs are

fully human insofar as tastes and desires are freely cultivated within a society. When workers are reduced to working to realize mere biological needs, they are reduced to the status of mere “animals”. Their biological needs, which should take form as developed human needs (for example, the cultivation of acquired tastes or aesthetic sensibility), become merely “animal” needs of bodily survival. A fully emancipated person flourishes insofar as (a) their biological needs are not only realized but further cultivated, (b) they are able to develop and realize culturally refined needs, and finally (c) the conditions of work itself is no longer alienated but allows for free creative expression. This idea shares many similarities with Aristotle’s ethics but differs in Marx’s rejection of hierarchical thinking and his incorporation of historicism into his theory of human nature.

The thesis that Marx has a moral philosophy needs to be made consistent with his criticism of “moralism” and “preaching morality” in texts like the *German Ideology*. Marx describes moralists as those who argue for the rationality or intuitive goodness of certain transcendent ideals, and demand that society fulfill these ideals instead of trying to understand morals from the material conditions that produce them. The *1844 Manuscripts* and the connection to Aristotle shows how we can reconcile Marx’s rejection of moralizing with the claim that he did have positive normative ideals. Aristotle’s moral philosophy describes virtues and vices, how they are cultivated, and how they relate to theory and praxis, but he did not argue for the intrinsic goodness of any transcendent ideals. In other words, Aristotle’s ethics does not constitute a set of ideal principles but instead centers on the process of habituation that creates conditions for human flourishing. Likewise, Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* starts from real material conditions as its foundation, and how different conditions either facilitate or inhibit the

development of wellbeing. In other words, moral ends are achieved through practical engagement with and consciousness of the world, not by advocating for abstract ideals derived with no regard to material conditions.

Chapter 3 Summary – The Ontology of Capital, the Commodity Fetish, and its Humanist Themes

In chapter 3, I will look at how the notion of dialectics and the ontology of commodification in *Capital* reproduces the notions of alienation found in his early writings. This undermines the argument of Althusser that *The German Ideology* represents a strong and fundamental break in Marx's own thought. Specifically, the process of commodification first turns external objects into mere means and conceals their true good behind exchange value, and then turns subjects into mere means too. Commodification gives Marx an empirical basis to study how the labor market alienates human beings from their labor, from their needs and from other people. What Althusser gets right is that Marx now has a historiological and scientific basis upon which he can expand his arguments and study economic conditions empirically. His theory of exploitation allows exploitation to be studied quantitatively as well as qualitatively such that the real mechanisms of the market can be grasped by his theory. However, this does not entail an abandonment of the theory of alienation or human nature of his early works.

We can see how Marx retains his idea of human nature in one of his critiques of Jeremy Bentham in *Capital*. Marx argues that Bentham's principle of utility reifies bourgeois society as a part of fundamental human nature. Against such a notion, Marx defends a dialectical method for reasoning about human nature by grasping a

theoretical notion of the human through its various appearances across history. This requires a dialectical method whereby each appearance and its relationship to other appearances plays a role in the continued development of human nature. By understanding each moment as a part of the historical development of humanity, we can form a virtuous abstraction instead of a vicious reified one like Bentham's. This suggests that Marx still held onto a Hegelian notion of human nature as outlined by his *1844 Manuscripts* and did not entirely abandon his philosophical anthropology in his move towards social science.

The transmutation of human nature caused by the commodification of labor power will take center stage in *Capital*. As a commodity, human nature comes to be reified merely as a thing on the market. Capitalist society produces great increases in productivity, but it conceals the real human good underneath a reified system of exchange value. If a worker cannot get his labor valued sufficiently on the marketplace, then the worker will lose access to health care or shelter, or even food and water. The good for the worker thus disappears in the face of an alienated system of exchange value that comes to stand above real individuals. Capital grows through the exploitation of value produced by commodified labor, and its *entelechy* is to pursue the ends of accumulation.

Marx argues that commodification and exploitation deform the natural human tendency towards sociability and cooperation. Capitalism goes further than previous economic systems in encouraging the development of economic cooperation, eventually on a global scale. The advantage of this for Marx is a kind of universalism that transcends regions or international borders. However, capitalism does this on the

fundamentally alienated terms of class exploitation. It reduces cooperation to a means of realizing efficiency and economies of scale through the division of labor. Every population is dragged into the same global market, structured by a universal system of exchange which subsumes local markets and destroys any economic system not compatible with market forces. The values of efficiency and economies of scale are not intrinsically bad, but when unconstrained by the needs of the workers the pursuit of these ends becomes oppressive and exploitative. The division of labor is not determined by what is good for the workers, but instead what serves the interests of capital as a disembodied, alienated and reified force.

Chapter 4 Summary – The Working Day, Human Development and the Flourishing Thesis in Marx’s *Capital*

This chapter will lay out Marx’s analysis of the proletarian moral standpoint and how he endorses it in *Capital*. It will track the differing standpoints that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat take on certain economic realities, how they give different moral justifications to their standpoints, and how these moral notions relate to their interests. The central issue taken up in this chapter will be the working day and the political movement which centers around it, although it will also address working conditions as well as unemployment and underemployment. Contra Wood’s reading of *Capital*, Marx does endorse the proletarian standpoint on the working day, and he does endorse the prescriptive claim that the working day ought to be shortened. Marx ultimately justifies his criticisms of the working conditions under capitalism for its failure to realize the intrinsic good of human development. Against the character of human development under capitalism, Marx defends a notion of well-rounded human development that

universalizes flourishing. This chapter will end with a section on the emancipated society described by Marx throughout the chapter, and how it reveals his commitment to a normative ideal. This future socialist society is treated by Marx as the culmination and embodiment of the values that develop out of proletarian morality, as well as the one social form which can fully realize human nature.

The bourgeoisie takes a moral stance on the working day which centers on the free choice of individuals in the marketplace. The proletariat pushes back against this due to the physical, moral, and social costs of their exploitation at the hands of the bourgeoisie. This leads to a struggle over the length of the working day, which goes back to the origins of capitalism itself. Their different moral perspectives are conditioned by but not reducible to their class interests. The values that emerge organically from the practices engaged in by a class also contributes to its moral standpoint. For instance, bourgeois morality extends a variety of rights to workers which can be contrary to the interests of the bourgeoisie, such as the right to free speech. However, the interests of the class do limit the horizons of class morality, as the fundamental self-preservation of a class sets the horizons of its morality. Marx ultimately defends the proletarian view against the bourgeois one as it is the proletarian standpoint which really strives to universalize human flourishing, despite the universalist pretensions of bourgeois morality. This leads Marx to prescriptively endorse the reduction of the length of the working day among other central goals of the working class. Though Wood is correct that Marx's account here is not compatible with a strong juridical sense of morality, it is compatible with a eudaimonistic notion of morality as Marx supports those norms which best universalize human flourishing and enrich character.

In a section with the unassuming title “The Health and Education Clauses of the Factory Acts, the General Extension of Factory Legislation in England”, Marx discusses the degeneration of the working class under capitalism and their reduction to mere cogs in the machine. He contrasts this with Owen’s theory of education to show how the factory system is prefigurative to the production of “fully developed human beings” through a holistic approach to education:

As Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future is present in the factory system; this education will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as the methods of adding to the efficient of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings. (Marx, 614)

This passage shows how Marx grants labor a central role in human development, and human development as a central social end. It also points to the fact that Marx did have humanist and ethical objectives, even in the “scientific” late work of *Capital*. I take Marx to be suggesting his own form of *eudaimonia* centered on human beings as productive entities, and how we must produce and reproduce not only an edifying society, but ourselves as happy, fulfilled and socially engaged subjects. In this quote, we see the education of the full human being coming from a combination of technical knowledge, cultural formation and real productive experience.

Lastly, I will reference many of the passages from *Capital* where Marx alludes to the alternative future society of freely associated producers. Not only do these passages make the implicit normative claim that capitalism *should* be overcome, but they also reiterate elements of his early theories of human nature. Marx is implicitly drawing a normative preference for socialism without “preaching morality” or moralizing by contrasting the alienated and emancipated social conditions. Instead, workers

themselves will discover this norm when they become conscious of the historically contingent nature of their material conditions as well as how these conditions cause or exacerbate their suffering.

Chapter 5 Summary – The Meta-Ethics of Marx and Engels

This last chapter will deal with the meta-ethics of Marx and Engels, and how it confirms the moral reading of Marx. Importantly, Marx and Engels advocate for a class relativist view of morality. This raises an important question – if Marx and Engels are relativists, in what sense can they endorse a substantive normative approach? I argue that their relativism has two qualities that differs from the standard subjective relativism. First, as Engels understand morality as relative to class, it means that a universal morality is still possible in a classless society. This makes a universal, classless morality as an object to strive for in the future. Second, as morality is relative to class not culture or the individual, this is not a subjective or even intersubjective form of relativism but an objective one. This means these moral standpoints can be understood and judged externally, unlike subjective or cultural relativism where moral evaluations can only exist within a particular subject or intersubjectivity. Notably, this means that Marx and Engels can critique specific moral standpoints and their shortcomings. Both Marx and Engels identify proletarian morality as the most progressive and advanced class morality to date. However, this also means that as individuals within a 19th century capitalist context, they know their ability to define the morality of the future is limited by their own horizons.

This chapter will start with Engels's class relativism as described in *Anti-Dühring*. Engels critiques Dühring's account of an axiomatic, transcendent, and

ahistorical notion of morality as failing to grasp morality as a historical phenomenon that evolves and advances with class society. Newly emerging classes form their own moral perspectives that initially have progressive features. However, every morality degenerates over time as the class which creates that morality becomes socially obsolete. I draw an analogy to the satire of feudal Aristocratic morality in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to demonstrate how morality becomes decadent for Marx and Engels. The ideals of knight-errantry satirized in *Don Quixote* emerged in a time of instability and feudal violence in Europe, and in such a context chivalry represents a compelling moral system. However, as warfare became less prominent and as early capitalism began to emerge, the aristocratic ideals in knight-errantry become morally bankrupt. Though Don Quixote is a legitimately noble individual, the obsolete quality of his morality leads him to comic error. Likewise, Marx and Engels think bourgeois morality is increasingly bankrupt as its progressive goals are achieved and as it becomes merely a reified apparatus of class domination.

Notably, this notion of decadence does not mean class morality emerges in an entirely progressive form. Every class morality from its outset contains ironies and hypocrisies that cause catastrophic moral blind-spots, as is revealed in Marx's critique of primitive accumulation. However, the regressive features of bourgeois morality from its outset does not negate its progressive features such as the eventual abolition of special aristocratic privileges and universal protection before the law. Thus, Marx and Engels's class morality avoids simple linear progression in favor of a more nuanced approach to social and historical progress. Even proletarian morality emerges with flaws and shortcomings as Marx shows in his "Critique of the Gotha Program," however these

flaws are not nearly as catastrophic or regressive as the flaws of bourgeois morality and especially the aristocratic morality which preceded it.

There is still the question of how Marx's notion of human nature and flourishing is consistent with the class relativism laid out by Engels and strongly implied in some of Marx's other works. If morality is merely relative to class in a class society, then how is human flourishing not simply one class-relative end among others? Why would Marx see it as any more or less right than the ends of bourgeois forms of morality like Bentham's utilitarianism? As the meta-ethics of Marx and Engels makes morality relative to objective conditions, it is possible to evaluate these class moralities in terms of how successful they are at achieving or universalizing human flourishing or identifying real barriers to flourishing. Though class standpoints are relative, a more progressive class can come to understand the moral standpoint of the reactionary class, often better than that class does. The proletariat in many respects has a better understanding of bourgeois morality and its pitfalls than the bourgeoisie itself. Yet humanity must develop to a point where a class can emerge as a self-conscious community for that class morality to exist. The objective basis for working class morality did not exist under feudalism, even if there were a handful of plebians, as social conditions had not advanced enough to make proletarians sufficiently numerous or class conscious enough to articulate their own distinct moral standpoint. Class morality moreover is not inconsistent with individuals consciously abandoning their class morality under certain conditions. As society becomes sufficiently advanced for a class morality to become decadent, individuals within a class can come to recognize their own morality as obsolete, as the bourgeois Engels himself does with bourgeois morality.

Ultimately, chapter 5 confirms the initial thesis that Marx does have a prescriptive approach to ethics in the form of proletarian morality. Neither Marx nor Engels think this is the final form morality will take, but both think it is the most advanced and progressive morality in our age. They also agree that it best grasps the social conditions under capitalism. Proletarian morality is a solution to the real material problems of the proletariat, and therefore an expression of their interests, however it is also an expression of universal human interests insofar as proletarian morality strives for the negation of class itself.

Chapter 1: The Question of Marx's Moral Philosophy and the Ethics of Marxism

The ambiguity in Marx and Engels's writings on morality and ethics has led to a debate between scholars who broadly hold two views. The first view is that Marx is a non-moral thinker who understands morality as an aspect of ideology and therefore Marx's philosophy lacks a moral dimension. Marxism is solely a scientific approach to history that aims to understand historical change in mechanistic or structural terms and makes no prescriptive demands. The second view holds that Marx held some notion of ethics that can be inferred across his works, even if he never explicitly laid out an entire ethical theory. As well as holding that Marx had a moral critique of capitalism, exploitation and alienation, this view also holds that Marx was committed to the idea of building an ethically and morally superior society. The debate is further complicated by the fact that those who argue that Marx and Engels did have a distinctive positive approach to normativity are themselves divided into two camps. The first group argues that Marx is primarily motivated by a notion of universal justice which capitalism intrinsically fails to live up to like any society built around class exploitation. The second group argues that Marx is instead motivated by a notion of human flourishing like Aristotle. It is important to note that the justice and flourishing camps often differ more on emphasis than substance. We will see Jon Elster reference Aristotle's theory of the good life in his account of Marx's theory of justice, and George McCarthy articulates a theory of justice in his Aristotelian account of Marx. This chapter will show that those who read Marx as having an ethics of character and human flourishing akin to

Aristotle's hold the most plausible view in avoiding a moral system Marx explicitly rejects while still accounting for his theories of human nature and of flourishing.

This chapter will review these various positions through the thinkers who are paradigmatic of each of these three approaches, and note their various advantages and disadvantages. Section 1 will deal with Eugene Kamenka's early foray into the topic of Marx's ethics and how he frames the debate. Section 2 will deal with the non-moral approach found in the works of R.C. Tucker, Allen Wood and Louis Althusser. Section 3 will cover the justice-based approach found in the works of G.A. Cohen, Ziyad Husami and Jon Elster. The final human flourishing approach is covered in section 4, which covers George McCarthy, Norman Levine, Milton Fisk and Sean Sayers.

Eugene Kamenka and the question of Marx and ethics

One of the earliest scholarly attempts to work out Marx's stance on ethics was Kamenka's *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (1962) which initiated the debate on the character of Marx's ethical thinking. Kamenka was an Australian Marxist and humanist who challenged an orthodox reading of Marxism that he saw going back to Engels. This orthodoxy was fundamentally inconsistent in that on one hand, it rejected moral arguments yet on the other hand saw itself as struggling for universal social justice. To resolve this contradiction, Kamenka argues that Marx rejects prescriptive ethics but embraces a unique kind of descriptive ethics.

In Kamenka's reading, Marx's causal determinism and rejection of transcendent and ahistorical ideals rules out prescriptive normative ethics. Norms are obligations established between two parties, but prescriptive normative "science" conceals the social origin of the obligation and presents it instead as a transcendent, supra-empirical

principle. Instead of making prescriptive moral demands, Marx instead describes the good and evil properties of various actions. Kamenka argues, however, that this view is confused by the metaphysical inconsistencies in Marx's early thought. The ethical question for early Marx is how capitalism and other oppressive systems impose alien needs on humanity. Kamenka criticizes this view in how it assumes that oppression and exploitation are not themselves expressions of human nature, but he thinks there is a kernel of truth in Marx's claim which is that there are social goods, which are cooperative with one another, and social evils which are parasitic on one another:

Thus he [Marx] argues that the free press is free, its activity is internally coherent, while censorship is necessarily incoherent and unstable, parasitic upon the press and unable to develop its presuppositions without inconsistency. Similarly, his whole distinction between the political spirit and civil society rests on this conception of goods as being able to work and co-operate coherently, while evils conflict not only with goods, but with each other. (Kamenka, 99)

It is important to note that Kamenka does not mean that it is internally coherent or conflicting in an abstract logical sense as Kant would, but instead that they are at odds with one another in practice.⁸ Kamenka thinks that late Marx clears up some of the metaphysical issues by adopting a new notion of human nature which is not essentialist. Yet the late work begins to overlook the importance of character ethics, Kamenka argues, due to its economic reductionism.⁹ Moreover Marx still smuggles essentialist ideas into his theory;

⁸ Though Marx does not use this language himself, Kamenka suggests that Marx's descriptive ethics is best applied to motives. There are not ends one ought to pursue, simply bad motives (which are parasitic on other motives) and good motives (which are harmonious with other motives) for human action. Motives like individual self-interest tend to be mutually undermining, whereas cooperative motives are not. (Kamenka, 100-101, 105)

⁹ For instance, the evil of exploitation for the sake of money is parasitic on the good of the need to be productive. Evils can have good outcomes only insofar as they undermine one another.

What is utopian in Marx's vision is his constant reliance on the productive spirit, on the operation of goods in individuals, without paying any attention to their character, to the conditions in which they arise in any given individual and spread through a society, and to the character of the forces opposing them. It is here that the 'human essence' is still assumed in Marx's mature work (Kamenka, 159)

Kamenka goes on to argue that Marx's failure to sufficiently address the development of character was a consequence of his economic determinism and his essentialist view of human nature. This failure undermined his whole theory by placing insufficient attention on the ethical dimension of historical progress.

The reading given by Kamenka was commendable for drawing out ethical themes in Marx's writings that had been historically overlooked. However, he is too quick to rule out any prescriptive account of morality on Marx's part. I do not read Marx's rejection of moralism as a rejection of prescriptive morality but merely a rejection of grounding prescriptions on transcendent truth.¹⁰ There are still norms as a fundamental part of lived social existence, regardless of whether they are grounded on transcendent or ahistorical truth claims. More importantly, these norms can both inhibit or facilitate the development of true solidarity or social progress. Whether he is correct on the issue of normativity, Kamenka's inquiry helped to initiate the important discussion on Marxism and ethics. Perhaps the most important admission Kamenka makes, however, is the general difficulty involved in deriving Marx's ethics due to his refusal to directly

Thus monetary greed might motivate an individual to moderate their over-consumption of intoxicants, but they can never in themselves lead to the good. (Kamenka, 159)

¹⁰ My own reading of Marx's criticism of "moralism" is found in Chapter 2 of this monograph.

address the issue.¹¹ This goes a long way to explain the lively debate between such vastly different interpretations of the same thinker.

The non-moral reading of Marx

The non-moral reading of Marx is best seen in the works of Tucker, Wood, and Althusser. Broadly speaking, these views rest on the Marxist distinction between the base, or the real material system of production and circulation, and the superstructure, or the ideological and cultural institutions that maintain or enforce norms and provide them with their interpretation. The materialist dialectic of Marx, in this view, aims to comprehend the nature and development of the base and how it conditions the superstructure, and Marx holds that morality and ethics are a part of the apparatus of the superstructure. The exact boundaries between base and superstructure are contested among readers of Marx, as well as the relationship between base and superstructure. For Wood, Tucker, and Althusser alike, the consequence of morality being superstructural is that Marx views morality and ethics to be mere questions of ideology. Despite the similarities of their views, however, they are approaching it with different motives. Tucker is largely critical of Marx's moral views, though Wood is somewhat more sympathetic, while Althusser, who was a party militant of the French Communist Party, was a fierce defender of Marx's account.

¹¹ Kamenka initiates his work with such an admission of the paucity of Marx's explicit works on morality and ethics; "Marx himself wrote nothing devoted directly to the problems of moral philosophy. Nowhere did he analyze critically the meaning of moral terms or the basis of ethical distinctions; nowhere did he consider carefully the concept of moral obligation or the criteria for distinguishing moral demands from other demands" (Kamenka, 1)

R.C. Tucker and Allen Wood, and morality as class interest

The amoral reading of Marx emerges in the anglophone tradition out of the works of Robert Tucker and Allen Wood. These two thinkers argue that the scientific thinking of Marx has no interest in morality and does not think it is a legitimate path of enquiry. That is not to say that Marx did not have a moral worldview on a personal level, but he did not consciously incorporate moral concerns into his philosophical system. Instead, Marx's work is entirely descriptive and predictive in trying to prove the inevitability of something Marx had a personal stake in realizing (that being a Proletarian revolution, of course). The thesis is often described as the Tucker-Wood thesis, recognizing not only the closeness of the two thinkers but the way in which Wood takes up and develops Tucker's original proposal.¹²

Published around the same time as Kamenka's work, Tucker's *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* does not argue that Marx was amoral, but simply that his philosophy strived to be amoral. While Tucker thinks Marx had valuable insights on alienation,¹³ he is critical of Marx's disregard for ethics. Tucker thinks that Marx had personal moral commitments in favor of abolishing capitalism and emancipating workers but thought that these commitments never made it explicitly into his theory. They function more as quasi-religious commitments than an ethical philosophy:

In general, men who create myths or religious conceptions of reality are moralists in the sense in which this term has been used here. They may in fact be obsessed with a moral vision of reality, a vision of the world as an arena of conflict between good and evil forces. If so, ethical inquiry is entirely foreign to their mental makeup (21-22)

¹² See Nielsen's excellent breakdown of their argument (Nielsen, "Marx on Justice: The Tucker-Wood Thesis Revisited")

¹³ Tucker, 238

A moralist for Tucker is one who accepts a set of moral principles without ever placing them under rational enquiry the way an ethical philosopher would. Marx qualifies as one as he never develops an explicit ethical philosophy and even claims to reject moral principles, even though his theory rests on a series of unquestioned moral presuppositions.

In the final chapter of his book, Tucker aims to show that Marx's mature scientific works commit him to a kind of mythic thinking that rejects appeals to morality and justice. This is because the mythical thinker considers their ends to be beyond rational inquiry, thus no longer the realm of the kinds of things that can be defended through ethical or moral theorizing. Yet this amoral mythical approach betrays an assumed and suppressed commitment to morality:

There was no question whatever of propounding some normative principle of life and conduct. What Marx produced, therefore, in *Capital* was not a book of ethics but a book of revelation. As such, however, this bible of Marxism, as it is justly called, is moralistic from beginning to end. (231)

This makes Tucker an interesting member of the amoral camp in that he thinks Marx is hypocritically amoral. Marx's theory avoids any moral discourse, instead viewing morality and justice as mere expression of ruling class interests (a thought developed further by Wood as we shall see) but nonetheless reveals Marx's own moral commitment to a world without exploitation. Tucker reads Marx as fundamentally troubled by the division of the individual from themselves through alienation, but Marx forgets the moral dimension of individual greed and motive by locating the problem outside of the subject and in the disembodied, mindless category of capital. Thanks to this, Marx ignores, or at best seriously understates the need for moral subjective development, instead understanding the problem as purely social and systemic.

Wood further develops Tucker's thesis in his work *Karl Marx*. He uses the following distinctions between utilitarianism and Kantianism to elaborate on Marx's understanding of ideology and morality.¹⁴ The first is the distinction between moral goods and non-moral goods. For Kant, moral goods are different from non-moral goods. The quest to realize moral goods is achieved through the categorical imperative, which demands that rational subjects follow universal obligations. Moral goods are founded in human reason alone and are entirely independent of the consequences of our actions. Non-moral goods are achieved through the hypothetical imperative, which does not impose universal moral demands on rational subjects but merely suggest heuristics for how to best achieve non-moral ends. For utilitarianism on the other hand, there is no distinction between moral goods and non-moral goods, as all moral goods are grounded in material wellbeing. Morality for the utilitarian seeks the maximalization of all goods and the minimalization of all evils, and the good and the bad respectively is determined by real world interests. The second distinction is whether moral goods are higher than non-moral goods or not. For the Kantian, moral goods always take priority over non-moral goods. This is because of the universal character of the categorical imperative, such that any hypothetical imperative is automatically trumped by the categorical. For example, one may have a heuristic that diners are more likely to get customers if the customers do not believe that there is an infestation of cockroaches. This heuristic could justifiably lead the owner of the diner to keep his business clean, but it might also motivate him to lie to his customers which would break our categorical duty to not lie. In the second case, the categorical imperative clearly trumps the hypothetical

¹⁴ Wood, 129

imperative. For this reason, moral goods determine when we should and should not follow hypothetical imperatives instead of the other way around. For the utilitarian on the other hand there is no distinction between moral and non-moral goods. Even when we form moral rules of action, these rules depend on the best possible distribution of all goods in general to maximize happiness or pleasure while minimizing suffering.

Wood argues that Marx distinguishes between moral and non-moral goods like Kant, though unlike Kant he only draws this distinction to reject moral goods. Moral goods are merely expressions of ideology where non-moral goods emerge from material human needs. Marx is in turn akin to Mill's utilitarianism in emphasizing the real material needs of humans. The main difference with Mill is that Marx does not understand the distribution of non-moral goods in moral terms but sees them as mere realization of material needs. It is descriptively true that humans have a host of needs and seek out social systems that are best suited for realizing these needs. Hence, for Marx the history of human development and revolutions is a strictly non-moral process of various classes struggling to maximize their interests.

Wood's view rests on an interpretation of Marx whereby morality is merely the ethical principles of the existing economic system. Morality in this view is the organizing set of mores taken for granted by a particular system. As such, any capitalist can reasonably say that their decisions are "just" according to the moral system of liberal capitalism. According to Wood, Marx does not recognize any morality outside of the hegemonic economic system, so one cannot meaningfully challenge the capitalist within a capitalist system as unjust:

There may be no unequal exchange between worker and capitalist, but in reaping the fruits of the worker's unpaid labour the capitalist is still exploiting him and, the standard view has it, taking from him what is justly his. This view, Wood argues, rests on a mistaken and ideologically distorted conception of property. In effect, it assumes the idyllic *mutualité* of purely individual private property. It talks as if the capitalist system were a system of individual commodity production. But if such a system ever really existed, surplus value, and hence exploitation, could not exist, and the problem would not arise (Nielsen, 32)

In fact, since all justice is the justice of the ruling system, any insurrectionary act against capitalism is an injustice. Since morality always represents the interests and standpoint of the ruling class, “morality is more an obstacle to human progress than one of its weapons” (Wood, 141). It is only by shedding the shackles of moralistic ideology that the working class can gain class consciousness.

A central problem for Wood is that he focuses on two options – the deontological and the utilitarian. Wood does briefly consider an Aristotelian notion of the “good” in the form of “self-actualization” but argues that for Marx this is a “non-moral good”.¹⁵ It’s not made clear why this is the case. Wood himself does acknowledge Marx’s common-sense notions of virtue in condemning the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. He also acknowledges that Marx recognizes the needs of virtues – even bourgeois ones – within society more broadly and the working class more specifically:

Bourgeois morality, for instance, also teaches virtues such as kindness, generosity, loyalty, and fidelity to promises. But there is no reason to think that these teachings in their bare, bloodless generality are peculiar to bourgeois society or necessarily serve bourgeois interests. They become specifically bourgeois only when united with other ideas and practices ... Marx obviously expects proletarians to practice generosity and loyalty among themselves, and realizes that without these moral virtues the movement will neither succeed nor be deserving of anyone’s support. (154)

¹⁵ Wood, 126

If Wood had considered the Aristotelian position where human flourishing is a moral good, then this recognition on Wood's part would have only served as evidence for that position.

One reason that Wood may be working within such narrow notions of justice is that much of his argument centers around a few passages where Marx states that the capitalist is just according to the liberal conception of justice.¹⁶ According to Wood, Marx thinks justice is intrinsically a function of the hegemonic mode of production. Yet the notion of justice Wood is using here is only a systemic and juridical sense. There is also a general sense of justice, which is motivated by a sense of reasonable disgust at one person's actions or motives. Exploitation is only just in accordance with the established economic and political order, but these things may still be unnecessarily harmful and therefore unjust in the popular sense of the term, both for Marx and for workers. Wood acknowledges that there are many "bad" things about Capitalism for Marx, like exploitation and alienation, but he asserts that these are not "unjust" for Marx:

Capitalism can be condemned without any ideological mystification or illusion by showing how it starves, enslaves and alienates people, that is, how it frustrates human self-actualization, prosperity, and other nonmoral goods. But Marx rejects moral norms (such as right and justice) as acceptable vehicles of social criticism or apologetics (Wood, 128)

It is true that Marx rejects abstract rights and critiques justice, but that does not mean he rejects norms *in toto* unless we've also defined norms in a similarly narrow sense.

¹⁶ One example is the following quotation from Marx given by Wood; "The justice of transactions which go on between agents of production rests on the fact that these transactions arise out of the production relations as their natural consequences. The juristic forms in which these economic transactions appear as voluntary actions of the participants, as expressions of their common will or as contracts that may be enforced by the state against a single party, cannot, being mere forms, determine this content. They only express it. This content is just whenever it corresponds to the mode of production, is adequate to it. It is unjust whenever it contradicts it. (Wood, 130-131)

Nielsen argues that Wood's narrow sense of justice and a rigid distinction between moral and non-moral goods makes his argument a semantic issue.¹⁷ Marx's rhetorical disgust with capitalists does, Nielsen argues, indicate a sense of injustice in a broad sense if not in the juridical or systemic sense:

All that Tucker and Wood can show is that, if their own readings are correct, in a specialized, quasi-technical sense of the term 'justice' (or, more accurately, *Gerechtigkeit*) Marx and Engels did not claim that capitalism is unjust. On the contrary, Marx and Engels give us to understand that capitalism is just (Again in this very special sense) or at least not unjust. But no substantive issues actually divide the contestants, for, given Tucker and Wood's acceptance of the above description as an accurate rendering of Marx's beliefs, they must agree with Husami and Young that capitalism is indeed, in the plain, untechnical sense of the term, an unjust social system. (Nielsen, 45)

In this way, Wood's view is only plausible because he defines both justice and normativity so narrowly that he can extrapolate a rejection of ethical norms as such from a rejection of abstract rights and juridical justice.

Althusser and the critique of humanist ideology

The position of Althusser is similar to Wood's though his critique is more clearly situated in a particular political context. Althusser was interested primarily in refuting the humanistic reading of Marx, though he does so in a way which also rejects "Marxist" ethics, aesthetics and other normative ideologies in favor of scientific rigor. Althusser opposed socialist humanism, as he viewed it as an ideological mystification of Marx's core theses. The *1844 Manuscripts* contain Marx's primary writings on alienation and its dehumanizing consequences. Unlike later writings, the *1844 Manuscripts* analyze capitalism largely in the language of Feuerbach's philosophical anthropology. When

¹⁷ Nielsen, 42-50

they were initially published in 1932, the manuscripts offered textual evidence for heterodox Marxist humanists. Notably in the Anglophone world, Erich Fromm published commentary on the first English language edition and used it to justify his humanist reading of Marx. These views also became popular within Communist philosophers in the Soviet bloc like Adam Schaff, and it was these trends which Althusser was most interested in countering.¹⁸ These trends, in Althusser's eyes, were motivated by a justifiable rejection of the cult of personality and authoritarianism of the Soviet Union in the 1930s through to the 50s but they had no meaningful explanatory power as a moralist rejection of objective realities.

For Althusser, humanists fundamentally misread the development of Marx's thinking. In his essay "Marxism and Humanism", Althusser distinguishes between an "early" Marx who is struggling to overcome the frameworks he inherited from Hegel and Feuerbach, and the "late" Marx who has matured beyond these frameworks and replaced them with strictly scientific analysis. The systems of Hegel and Feuerbach were not scientific but merely ideological. Hegel is ideological insofar as he remains committed to German Idealism and the priority of philosophical and intellectual history over material history. Feuerbach might seem to avoid ideological mystification by adopting metaphysical materialism, but he remains ideological insofar as his concept of human nature is an ahistorical abstraction.

Althusser holds that in his early writing, Marx is working to overcome his Feuerbachian heritage. Marx recognizes that his humanistic intellectual heritage is ideological, but he doesn't yet have the language or conceptual structure to offer an

¹⁸ Althusser, 11

alternative. In his later writing, he has developed a materialistic, empirical and entirely scientific method to look at history. Althusser argues that by then Marx had matured past the ideological mystification of his early writings, and as such the attempts to read the *1844 Manuscripts* into later Marxism is a bad reading. Althusser argues that the *German Ideology* represents a clean break between the early ideological writings and the late scientific writings. In that work, Marx officially turns his back on the morally loaded concepts like “alienation” as well as the moralistic aspiration for a humanist society.¹⁹

Althusser’s view asserts a strong distinction between ideology and science. For Althusser, ideology is not simply a conceptual framework held by the conscious subject. It is instead a social structure that exists outside and independently of the individual consciousness. The social structure provides a network of representations that operate on a subconscious level. Individuals adopt ideology through the activity of living within the society. Ideology is a condition of possibility for consciousness that emerges through lived experience. As a condition of possibility for consciousness, ideology is an intrinsic part of social existence, so Althusser does not think ideology can be abolished nor does he hold that Marx thought it could. As such, even a communist society, Althusser argues, will have ideological precepts like ethics, aesthetic values, and so on. Ideology is a necessary component of the lived reality of people really existing under a social or economic system. Althusser holds that science, on the other hand, is a set of objective methods which allows the scientist to cut through the obfuscations caused by ideology. If ideology remains at the level of the superstructure, science can reveal the character of

¹⁹ Althusser, 33

the base. It exposes the real relationship between social conditions and ideology. The emergence of a science represents an epistemic break from traditional ideological ways of knowing as scientific methods allow the theorist to see through ideological mystification. By adopting a scientific method, Marx can talk about social conditions in terms other than the ones granted to us by the dominant ideology.

Inasmuch as a political system necessarily secretes ideology, Althusser is not surprised that ideology remains intellectually relevant within Soviet society. He insists he did not intend to condemn ideology “as a social reality” (Althusser, 11). His purpose is to preserve the purity of Marxist theory from the “theoretical effects of ideology, which are always a threat or a hinderance to scientific knowledge” (Althusser, 12). The danger is that ideology serves as a crutch to compensate for insufficiencies in our theory, thereby concealing the most challenging and important questions:

For the concepts of socialist humanism, too (in particular the problems of law and the person), have as their object problems arising in the domain of the superstructure: State organization, political life, ethics, ideologies, etc. And it is impossible to hold back the thought that the recourse to ideology is a short cut there too, a substitute for an insufficient theory. Insufficient, but latent and potential. Such is the role of this temptation of the recourse to ideology; to fill in this absence, this delay, this gap, without recognizing it openly, by making one’s need and impatience a theoretical argument, as Engels put it, and by taking the need for a theory for the theory itself. (Althusser, 241)

Humanism and its emergence can be an issue of study for a scientific theory, and such a study might be informative, but only as an object of critique. Scientific Marxists should not endorse humanism with its ideological baggage but view it as a phenomenon whose causes and effects can be exposed and made explicit. It is a mystified response to the real lived conditions of an individual, and this mystification can be revealed through the

application of the correct method. In this respect, humanism is no more or less foreign to Marxism than religion or bourgeois conceptions of justice.

Conclusion - the amoral approach

The common thread in these thinkers is not that Marx is an immoralist or advocates for immorality, nor that Marx thought morality could or should be abolished. The point instead is to argue that Marx himself did not see moral philosophy as playing a role within his philosophical system. Morality is merely an object of ideological critique as a system of norms asserted by one class. A class comes to understand their interests ideologically, but this ideological understanding is foreign to Marxist philosophy. Instead, his system is strictly a method of economic analysis to understand the true causes of the immiseration of the working class, the crises of capitalism, and the direction of human economic and political development.

This interpretation has several challenges. First, it relies on hard distinctions like those between ideology and science or moral and non-moral goods that are not above criticism. For instance, it is not clear whether Wood's distinction between moral and non-moral "goods" is meaningful, or why Marx's proletarian science would not orient workers towards the ideology that best expresses their needs and self-consciousness. Second, they overlook passages in Marx's late work that seem to take some sort of normative stance. Third, it reduces morality and ethics to the ideologically transcendent systems Marx rejects but overlooks the naturalistic, empirical and socially situated ethical stances advocated by Aristotle and Epicurus, as well as the positive influence of both thinker's ethical theories on Marx's own work.

The justice reading of Marx

The non-moral reading is challenged by those thinkers like G.A. Cohen who argue that Marx had a justice-based approach to ethics. This approach appeals to a notion of just and unjust social relationships and derives universally valid norms from these relations. For a worker reading *Capital*, the description of exploitation and dehumanization should summon indignation and disgust. The indignation is an expression of the fundamentally unjust relationship of exploitation by the capitalist. This interpretation holds that the passages quoted by Wood where Marx insists that exploitation is “just” according to the capitalist are meant to expose the irony of bourgeois notions of justice, not to assert that justice itself is a fundamentally flawed and ideological concept. It is precisely the fact that a hypothetical member of the bourgeoisie looks upon the relationship of exploitation as “just” that shows the myopic and empty character of the bourgeois standpoint on ethics. The worker is systematically paid less than their true value, and this robbery is the perpetual sin of capitalist economic relations.

G.A. Cohen and the injustice of exploitation

Perhaps the most notable example of the justice-based approach is the English Analytic Marxist G.A. Cohen. His *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* was a unique apology for Marx's philosophy of history within the tradition of analytic philosophy. Some of his later work touched on the issue of morality in Marxism. Cohen became interested in the ethical implications of exploitation. It was these ethical implications that motivated his own socialist commitments and rejection of capitalism, and which he thinks are of critical importance to the Marxist movement moving

forward. Notably, Cohen's ethical views are not intended as a strict exegesis of Marx but an attempt to give Marxism a new foundation considering the predictive failures of Marxist theory. Though his theory is a reconstruction of Marx's views, Cohen views his project as rooted in Marx's concerns with the conditions of the proletariat.

Cohen argues that Marx's theory of primitive accumulation was intended to show the unjust origins of capitalist accumulation.²⁰ Primitive accumulation is the subject of the final section of Marx's first volume of *Capital*. It consists of the elimination of common property and its distribution among a group of individuals. Members of the community who used to utilize the commons for their own sustenance must now pay rent to the new owners of the former commons.²¹ This original sin of capitalism enabled the rise of the new bourgeoisie. The process of primitive accumulation reveals the ideological pretensions of those capitalists who argue that their wealth and privilege emerged due to their industriousness. Instead, their class could only ever exist due to an original theft from those who would later become the proletariat.

This original sin in capitalism destabilizes the basic moral logic of capital. Cohen uses it to challenge Nozick's argument that freedom is only impaired by unjust acts, and that free exchange between individuals is a just expression of freedom.²² Cohen argues that "you cannot *both* deny that justice restricts freedom *and* claim that private property is just, since the institution of private property, like any other set of rules for holding and using things, both grants freedom *and* restricts it: owners of private property are

²⁰ Cohen, 302

²¹ The paradigmatic example is the multiple enclosure acts in England (and later the United Kingdom) which divided agricultural land among a small elite.

²² Cohen, 252

only free to do as they wish with what they own because non-owners are unfree to” (Cohen, 252). If the institution of private property itself originates in private interests unjustly appropriating the common good, then it is in fact a restriction on freedom for those without property.

The injustice of capitalism is not merely a consequence of the arbitrary and unjust process of primitive accumulation for Cohen, as private property is itself fundamentally an injustice.²³ This is because the institution of private property ensures that the basic means of survival and wellbeing are held by a class of monopolists. Necessities ought to be the property of all. Cohen recognizes that this kind of moral language is alien to the literal discourse of a lot of revolutionaries, but he argues that their own judgements and passions betray a deeply moral implicit worldview.²⁴ In *Self Ownership, Freedom and Equality* Cohen argues that injustice is caused by unequal distribution of the means of production in general. He differentiates between the descriptive and prescriptive analysis of the process of exploitation. Descriptively, unequal distribution of the means of production has an intrinsic tendency (even if unrealized) to cause maldistribution of production and consumption. Unequal distribution of the means of production is intrinsically unjust because it has the tendency to create this unjust distribution:

That sounds contradictory, so I must clarify the meaning which I attach to the phrase 'what it causes' in the italicized claim. 'What it causes' means, here, not what it has caused, is causing, or will cause, but, instead, what it tends to cause. A maldistribution of means of production is indeed unjust because of what it causes, because, that is, of a tendency inherent in it. Accordingly, it is intrinsically (though derivatively) unjust, because it is unjust no matter what its actual consequences are. (202, Cohen, G. A.. *Self-*

²³ Cohen, 296-299

²⁴ Cohen, 297

Ownership, Freedom, and Equality, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
ProQuest Ebook Central)

This formulation allows for Cohen to deal with thought experiments which show how maldistribution of the means of production does not necessarily cause exploitative relationships. For example, an individual philanthropic capitalist may decide to not only pay everyone in their enterprise equally, even themselves, but to distribute equal shares to all employees. Yet this does not change the basic structure or negate the general tendency.²⁵ Cohen compares the injustice of maldistributed means of production to the explosive nature of TNT. TNT has a tendency to explode, even if this tendency is not something that could be realized without oxygen and fire.

Cohen's turn to ethics is motivated in part by his critiques of Marxism. He saw the failure of Marx's predictive project to hold true but continued to hold the rejection of economic hierarchy as a normative ideal worth pursuing. Marx predicted the constant increase of industrial production to the point of limitless affluence, but the ecological crises of our time has shown that there are hard limits on productivity. Moreover, Marx also argued that scarcity was the ultimate cause of class inequality, but it is scarcity which motivates Cohen's call for socialism:

We can no longer believe the factual premisses of those conclusions about the practical (ir)relevance of the study of norms. We cannot share Marx's optimism about material possibility, but we therefore also cannot share his pessimism about social possibility, if we wish to sustain a socialist commitment. We cannot rely on technology to fix things for us: if they can be fixed, then we have to fix them, through hard theoretical and political labour. (11)

²⁵ An example is the contemporary American CEO Dan Price, who equalized all wages within his business Gravity Finance including his own. While this is a noble act of an individual, it does nothing to alter the wider wage structure in the broader economy and his company still depends on other exploitative customers.

As such Cohen thinks socialists need to revisit the normative implications of Marx's ideas to revise the grounds on which socialism is pursued. It is the normative ideal of production and distribution free of exploitation that would motivate humanity to pool its limited resources on a planet that can no longer afford waste and extravagant inequality. To overcome alienated labor, the lower stage of communism described in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* must embrace self-ownership by paying full value for work beyond that which is needed to sustain and expand the collective means of production. Self-ownership as a value is only abolished for Marx in the "higher stage" of communism once we have achieved super-abundance. Yet Cohen argues that we need to move past self-ownership without first achieving such super-abundance.

Cohen's view is interesting in two ways for those trying to determine the ethical commitments of Marx.²⁶ First, he comes up with a plausible moral account of why primitive accumulation and exploitation of labor is an injustice against the workers. In that respect he successfully derives a theory of justice that maps on to Marx's analysis of capitalism as well as the broader aims of his socialist political camp. Secondly, he maps his view out in opposition not only to orthodox communists but liberals like Rawls and conservative libertarians like Nozick. This means his normative account of Marxism is ready-made to bring to bear against the main moral arguments *against* socialism.

²⁶ There is more of interest for Cohen's philosophy in exploring the implicit ethical commitments of the socialist critique of exploitation and how it overlaps with other contrary moral theories. Interestingly, in *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* Cohen argues that self-ownership is an important element of Marx's normative critique of exploitation. Self-ownership is a libertarian idea going back to Locke and is frequently used to justify the morality of free market economics. It holds that it is unjust to violate one's person or what they have produced by their labor without their consent. Cohen sees the concept as paradoxically embedded in the Marxist critique of exploitation also. This is because the extraction of surplus labor violates the norm of self-ownership over time, and the notion that it is a "free and fair exchange" between employee and employer is an ideological obfuscation of the real relations at play.

Ziyad Husami, Jon Elster and the justice of proletarian indignation

Husami's argument ("Marx on Distributive Justice") shares a great deal with Cohen's in that he reads Marx as viewing capitalist exploitation as an injustice. Like Cohen, this injustice is an intrinsic feature of the exploitative relationship itself. Moreover, he shares Cohen's interest in the kinds of distributive frameworks discussed in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Husami's central thesis is that Marx connected the indignation of the proletariat to the distributive injustice of capitalism. This indignation motivates the working class to conceive of counter-norms which challenge bourgeois ideological values. Likewise, Jon Elster derives a notion of justice largely centered around the *Critique of the Gotha Program* and the models of distributive justice contained within. Elster develops the contrast between these two different notions of justice, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to the principle of justice within a market-based society. Both thinkers share the view that Marx had two separate notions of distributive justice – what Elster calls the contribution principle, or distribution based on the amount worked, and the needs principle, or distribution based on individual need.

Tucker and Wood read the following passage as supportive of the thesis that Marx saw capitalism as just; capitalist exploitation is "a piece of good luck for the buyer, but by no means an injustice to the seller."²⁷ According to Husami, this passage is meant to satirize capitalism.²⁸ Marx is not seriously suggesting capitalism is just, so much as to make the capitalist standpoint seem patently absurd. Husami thinks this is evident when we consider the passage in context – Marx is describing an act of trickery on the

²⁷ This quote is from *Capital*, Volume 1 chapter 7

²⁸ Husami, 189

part of the Capitalist. The fact he would describe this “justice” as a trick indicates that he considered the act malevolent and unethical. Husami’s argument rests in no small part on the kind of language Marx uses. Husami cites Marx’s use of “‘robbery’, ‘usurpation’, ‘embezzlement’, ‘plunder’, ‘booty’, ‘theft’, ‘snatching’ and ‘swindling’ (189)” to describe the extraction of the proletariat’s surplus value by the bourgeoisie. This is all clearly normative language that signifies the stealing of what is rightfully someone else’s to build their capital. In using those terms, Marx is noting his indignation at the treatment of the working class and hopes that his indignation is reflected in the consciousness of the worker as well.

The linguistic argument just presented is not sufficient for Husami’s case, however, so he proceeds to develop a further theory of distributive justice through Marx’s texts. He cites the *Critique of the Gotha Program* as a central work due to its descriptions of two distributive frameworks that emerge in a socialist society.²⁹ There is a lower stage, where distribution is determined by the actual production of an individual, or at least their time worked. This lower stage maintains some of the incentive and discipline systems of capitalism, but their levers are in the hands of workers. Then there is a higher stage, where distribution is determined by need. The bourgeoisie has its own notion of distributive justice that reflects their class interests. Here, Husami is agreement with Tucker, Wood and Althusser. Yet as much as the ruling class has a notion of justice, exploited classes will form their own conceptions of justice that reflect their standpoint. Socialists are the ones responsible for expressing these conceptions in theoretical and programmatic terms. Husami doesn’t think these moral

²⁹ Husami, 191

claims are only internally sound and did not think Marx thought they were either. He argues that Tucker and Wood can only commit to these views because they collapse Marx's moral theory into his moral sociology.³⁰

Husami wants to preserve the meaningfulness of the working class's indignation against the capitalist:

The interpretation of Wood and Tucker makes it impossible for the oppressed to criticize the injustice of their life situations, but the Marxian sociology of morals makes such criticism possible and comprehensible. Furthermore, Tucker and Wood state that Marx criticized capitalism, at least in part, for its inequality and unfreedom. But if the only applicable norm of justice is the one that accords with the capitalist mode of production then, similarly, the only applicable norms of equality and freedom must be the ones that accord with this mode of production. (195-196)

The indignation of the exploited or oppressed is something that emerges in slave society and feudalism too, and Husami sees Marx as providing a theoretical framework with which to explain the problem. The moral claims that follow from this indignation are a part of the ideological superstructure, but this is not a problem for Husami. The superstructure, Husami argues, is not a mere "epiphenomenon" but something which has a positive dialectical relationship to the base.³¹ This is a case of dialectical *Weschelwirkung* or "reciprocal action", where the activity of the superstructure can have a causal impact on the base as much as the base determines the content of the superstructure. In the case of socialism, this reciprocal action occurs through the existence of critical norms based on the lived experience of exploitation and oppression. Husami describes these norms as "counter-norms" which are elements of the

³⁰ Husami, 195

³¹ Husami, 197

superstructure that undermine their respective structures. This is how Husami reads Marx's claim that "the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy."³²

Like Husami, Elster intends to defend the notion that Marx's moral language does indicate a moral disgust towards exploitation. He draws this mainly from two texts – the theory of exploitation found in *Capital* and the purported principles of distributive justice found *The Critique of the Gotha Program*. Elster holds that for Marx, the extraction of surplus value, or uncompensated work, indicates an unjust relationship between the capitalist and the worker. However, Elster himself argues that exploitation is not a tenable moral category for fine-grain moral analysis – though many or most cases of exploitation may be unjust.³³ Such a framing would open up the moral principle to counterfactuals that distract from the heart of the matter. Such a counterfactual might be, for instance, that in the "lower" stage of communism where compensation is relative to contribution, a highly-paid and hard-working worker who saves could form enough capital to start a business and "exploit" other consenting workers. Unjust exploitation comes under three circumstances for Elster: first, primitive accumulation where the state uses force to dispossess people who now must work for a living (often to the private beneficiaries of the expropriation); second, cases where normal accumulation traps workers; and third, in cases of when the exploited party is the victim of unequal knowledge and organization.³⁴ This may be the case for most capitalist work, but nonetheless the concept of "exploitation" alone cannot explain what is wrong with these situations.

³² Husami, 197-198

³³ Elster, 228-229

³⁴ Elster, 228

Elster reads many of the same passages Wood uses to justify his position, concluding that Marx is opposed to transhistorical conceptions of justice. Bourgeois liberalism is one such notion, as it holds that there are certain universal rights such as the right to one's property, or the right to make mutually self-interested exchanges. These principles might be the norms of a functioning society, but they are not transhistorical and therefore universal rules, and treating them as such is to take these rules out of their historical context. Thus, Elster argues that Marx's opposition is towards the transhistorical nature of these notions of justice, not justice itself.³⁵ Echoing the thinkers in the flourishing camp, Elster does argue that Marx "adhered to a quasi-Aristotelian ideal of the good life for man" (219), which is transhistorically valid, but any principles or rights which are derived from that ideal are relative to the historical circumstances or social systems in which people find themselves. Justice is important, but there is no strict criteria for justice as its value is secondary to the value of individual self-actualization.³⁶

The current mode of distribution under capitalism is unjust for the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves, Elster argues. This is not due to individual coercion or ill will; instead of direct coercion by an individual, for Marx "it was a much more important part of his vision that capitalist exploitation is anonymous and mediated through the impersonal, competitive market" (Elster, 214). This mode of distribution is determined by market competition between a handful of capitalists. The coercion of the market is not merely established by the threat of starvation (which would make any modest social democracy no longer coercive), but that the alternatives are "so

³⁵ Elster, 220

³⁶ Elster, 221-222

unattractive that no man in his senses would choose them” (215). Elster calls the principle of compensation relative to the amount worked the “contribution principle”. This is a superior principle of justice than the free market valuation of the worth of the individual by ending the exploitation of labor. However, it fails to ultimately meet humanity’s true needs, so Marx needs his higher principle of justice – “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” Echoing Husami, Elster argues that this is a vastly superior notion of justice in that it fully recognizes the distinct needs all people have. A disabled person or a new mother might be unable to work the same number of hours as a young single man, so their needs may outstrip their capacity for work. Distribution according to need is impractical in earlier stages because the social and technical conditions do not yet exist to enable it, but once these conditions do hold then distribution in terms of contribution is no longer just. Hence, the contribution principle works to condemn capitalism, and the needs principle in turn condemns the contribution principle:

The contribution principle then appears as a Janus-faced notion. Looked at from one side, it serves as a criterion of justice that condemns capitalist exploitation as unjust. Looked at from the vantage point of fully developed communism, it is itself condemned as inadequate by the higher standard expressed in the needs principle (229-230)

Ethical and moral development in this view is the establishment of principles of justice that are increasingly more adequate to the real needs of human beings alongside the development of the technical capacities to realize these principles.

Conclusion - the justice approach

The strength of the justice-based approach is in its ability to grant a theoretical task to Marx’s own frequent and fierce condemnations of Capitalist hypocrisy and

injustice. Moreover, it clearly relates Marx's objective explanatory analysis to prescriptive claims about what should be the case and can explain why socialism isn't merely a future Marx was predicting but that socialism is something workers *ought* to struggle to bring about. The achievement of socialism isn't simply a prediction but a kind of materialist eschatology whereby the working class realizes a higher ideal of justice in society. The weakness is that it also can't entirely account for Marx's skepticism towards morality, ideology, and the positive historical role of superstructural causes.

One important weakness with this approach is that in general, it focuses on questions of distribution and consumption. This is seen in the intense focus on the two notions of justice found in *The Critique of the Gotha Program*. This goes against Marx's own focus on production over distribution as the central human activity. This might in part be Marx's fault, as even if his ethics is grounded in productivity first and distribution second his most explicit treatment of ethics in his late work—*The Critique of the Gotha Program*—says more about problems distribution despite also arguing for the primacy of production. Nonetheless, it is clear looking at the broader theory of Marx that distributive justice is downstream of problems like social and technical development. Moreover, while these theories acknowledge that Marx rejected abstract normative ethics based on transcendental principles, it's not clear what ontological status to give these ethical ideals or principles. If they are not transcendental ideals standing outside of material reality, then where do these ideals lie? For example, when Elster talks about the "needs principle", he is talking about a principle that is only a utopian aspiration in our own society, is a realizable aspiration in the lower stage of

communism and is an actual principle of social life in the higher stage of communism. Elster's solution, as we have seen, is to suggest that Marx unknowingly treats these as transcendent principles.

The flourishing approach

The flourishing approach argues that Marx's ethical thinking is not founded on ideals of justice but a notion of human flourishing. Many of these thinkers, in particular the ones who will be focused on in this chapter, root their vision in the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*. This notion is often understood to refer to a concept of wellbeing or flourishing. Aristotle argues that it is not mere pleasure, as not all good things are pleasurable and not all pleasurable things are good. This differentiates the Aristotelian approach from the utilitarian one, in that utilitarians try to reduce morality to simple variables like pleasure and pain alone. Alongside his concept of *eudaimonia*, Aristotle's ethics also relies on the habituation of *arete* (virtue) which are the excellent character traits which allow individuals and societies to achieve *eudaimonia*. Virtues lie in between vices which represent immoral and unhealthy extremes of human behavior. *Phronesis* is the practical wisdom possessed by those who have cultivated virtue that allows them to deliberate on the right course of action. The flourishing approach holds that Marx's notions of human nature, wellbeing, and praxis, and the norms which fall out of that notion, are reinterpretations of or analogous to the earlier Aristotelian system.

Norman Levine, chrematistics, and the constitutive subject

Norman Levine argues that Aristotle was what he calls a "classical humanist", and that Marx's theory resurrects this ancient Greek conception of morality and society.

Both Aristotle and Marx, Levine argues, share common notions of human nature and human flourishing. Levine also draws from the Epicureanism which Marx wrote his dissertation on. The notion of classical humanism contains a critique of chrematistics, or the science of making money from money. It also views social value in terms of real lived experience and not its expression in the money form. Marx sees the value of Aristotle critiques of money and exchange, and incorporates it into his own view, alongside a host of other fundamentally Aristotelian ideas about the relationship between individual humans, their state, and their society.

Aristotle viewed economics and politics as the two true activities of the virtuous citizen.³⁷ The economy took care of the household (*oikos*), while politics organized the state (*polis*) as a whole. These two realms of human action were appropriate for human nature, as production takes care of material human ends while politics takes care of our social ends. Money is necessary as a means to achieve these two activities, as the household needs money to exchange for goods which it cannot produce and the polis needs money to engage in trade and military affairs. Chrematistics as the science of making money from money turns money from a means to an end in itself instead of a means to realize other ends. This has a number of problems for Aristotle.³⁸ First, pursuing money as an end and not as a means inevitably leads to the sacrifice of the real human ends represented by the *oikos* and the *polis*, for instance when one foregoes developing virtue in favor of seeking profit. Second, there is no real limit to the accumulation of money, meaning that the pursuit of money is an unrealizable end. Third, as money distracts from true human ends and as it can be accumulated ad

³⁷ Levine, 179

³⁸ Levine, 146

infinitum, the pursuit of money as an ends in itself tends to increasingly corrupt the whole of society.

Aristotle's critique of chrematistics is very close to Marx's critique of capital, and Marx himself cites Aristotle's critique of chrematistics in *Capital*. Marx argues that in many respects Aristotle's economics contains the most accurate notion of the relationship between production and human ends.³⁹ Aristotle's only mistake was in not envisioning a successful economic and political model centered entirely around chrematistics! For Marx, capitalism not only pits subjects against one another in a competition to survive and undermines longstanding values but also fractures the individual personality. This is similar to the role chrematistics plays, in that it not only motivates people to exploit one another but also forces people to ignore those needs and talents that can't be realized efficiently or profitably.

Levine suggests that one of the major bridges between Aristotle and Marx was Hegel, who modernized Aristotle's metaphysics and politics. While the details go beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is notable that Levine sees Aristotle's metaphysics of the soul as a major influence on Marx through Hegel. In Hegel's philosophy, the Aristotelian concept of the soul becomes the constitutive subject:

Just as Aristotle regarded the Soul as the prius of human creativity, so Hegel judged the Mind as the prius. Hegel's Mind took the place of Aristotle's Soul, but in Hegel reason displayed the same productive energy as Aristotle's Soul. Hegel's Mind predicated the external and objectivity was produced by the constitutive subject: an appreciation of the actualities of the subject was the initial stage in any attempt to understand the subject. (215)

³⁹ Marx, 253-254 footnote 6

This, in turn, goes on to shape Marx's idea of the constitutive subject as the product of human labor:

On the basis of form, both Hegel and Marx were aware of the existence of the constitutive subject. In both Hegel and Marx the constitutive subject was the kinesis of historical evolution. But differences existed between the two men over content. Whereas in Hegel the constitutive subject was Mind, in Marx the constitutive subject was human labor. (235)

Likewise, Hegel also takes on Aristotle's idea of the political animal which in turn influences Marx. The Aristotelian ideal of the *polis* becomes Marx's idea of the commune through Hegel, which allows Marx to realize Greek humanism on a higher level than was possible for the ancients themselves.

George McCarthy and the ethics of self-realization

In *Marx and the Ancients*, McCarthy's analysis is based on a historical approach to philosophy like Levine where he seeks to uncover the ancient Greek influences in Marx's thought. Marx's ethics represent an intellectual debt he has to these early thinkers. The ancients molded Marx not only into an economist, but a moral philosopher who was interested primarily with the realization of the needs of the working class. In his later work *Marx and Social Justice*, McCarthy ties the flourishing theory with a theory of social justice. This shows that the flourishing approach does not need to reject justice as such, but the notion of justice is downstream from the notion of human flourishing.

Like Levine, McCarthy argues that Marx was heavily influenced by Aristotle and Epicurus. In his dissertation, Marx takes up Epicurus's concept of the "swerve", or the way that atoms act in non-mechanistic ways. Marx was a materialist, but he wasn't a materialist in a strictly mechanistic sense of the term. Mechanistic materialists, broadly

speaking, view the material world as a deterministic machine which works in an orderly and entirely predictable way. The “swerve” gives individual atoms some freedom or independence from the hard mechanical rules such that they can combine into larger objects. This inspired Marx to consider the possibility of a materialist system in which living creatures, particularly humans, can behave in ways that are not reducible to mechanistic systems.

McCarthy argues that Marx’s ethics center on the concept of human self-realization.⁴⁰ Central to this is Marx’s understanding of the role that human labor plays in human nature as described in Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*. In the activity of human labor, the individual realizes themselves in their daily activity by externalizing their subjective content into an objective production. They thereby create something that can realize their needs, both for material sustenance and personal development. Due to their individual development, they also undergo subjective change such that they habituate new skills and needs as well as form new experiences and desires. Alienated labor circumvents this process of self-realization and turns labor into a strictly instrumental project. Instead, their labor becomes a process of valorizing another’s capital, which reduces the worker to a productive mechanism.

Marx wants to transcend this circumstance and free workers to realize themselves in their labor, thereby habituating real skills and developing socially as flourishing individuals. This serves as the basis of Marx’s moral view. For Aristotle, ethics is about the realization of an individual’s nature as a virtuous, rational, and politically active agent in society through habituation. Habituation of virtue creates the

⁴⁰ McCarthy (2018), 10

conditions of possibility for *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. With practical wisdom, we can fully realize our humanity as contemplative subjects. McCarthy argues that Marx's notion of the development of the subject is also a form of self-realization in that the non-alienated subject can realize whichever of these potentialities are fulfilling for themselves and others in their community. The alienated subject on the other hand is constrained to only realize certain capacities that are demanded in a market society.

The difference between *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis* is central to McCarthy.⁴¹ *Episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* are the three kinds of knowledge described by Aristotle. *Episteme* is theoretical knowledge of the sciences and offers comprehensive but entirely abstract understanding of a topic. Geometry and metaphysics would both be examples of an *episteme*. *Techne* is the systematic and instrumental knowledge of a productive process, such as the knowledge of how to weave baskets from reeds. The knowledge of *techne* facilitates the perfection of the productive process into a predictable and planned one. Finally, *phronesis* is the practical wisdom that facilitates making the right choice in difficult situations. In other words, *episteme* governs abstract knowledge, *techne* governs production, and *phronesis* governs moral action.

In a later work *Marx and Social Justice*, McCarthy articulates a theory of justice through Marx. While this might seem like a concession to the justice camp, he broadly retains the Aristotelian framework of flourishing to support his theory of justice. This shows again that the distinction between the flourishing and justice approaches can be

⁴¹ McCarthy, 1990

fuzzy. However, McCarthy's notion of justice aims towards the flourishing of human subjects as its end, and views injustice as a systematic deprivation of flourishing:

For Marx, social justice is a moral and intellectual virtue promoting individual freedom, self-development and self-realisation of human rationality and creativity in productive, aesthetic, and practical activity (*praxis*) and a social ethics for the general welfare and common good within a political and economic democracy. Justice promotes the creative development of human powers, capacities, and character within an egalitarian and free polity. (McCarthy, 183)

This shows that it is possible, to an extent, to unite the flourishing and justice based approaches to Marx's ethics (and ethics in general), or at least blur the distinction between them.

Milton Fisk and Aristotelian class relativism

Fisk's work *Ethics and Society* systematizes Marx and Engel's ethical thinking. He has two major conclusions. First, Marx and Engels did have a concept of ethics centered around human flourishing akin to Aristotle's. Second, Marx and Engels believed that morality was relative to the class articulating it. When we bring these theses together, Fisk is effectively arguing that for Marx and Engels, different classes approach the goal of human flourishing in different terms based on their own relationship to the world. Class struggle is a struggle between classes seeking to make the world reflect their moral values.

Class relativism is the view that morality is the expression of the moral understanding and interests of a particular economic class. In this view, the aristocracy, peasantry, bourgeoisie, and proletariat all have their distinctive moral views which are often incompatible with one another. Marx and Engels's relativism is not a form of mere subjectivism where morality is simply subjective evaluative content, which would be

akin to views like emotivism where moral statements are non-truth-bearing expressions of emotional approval or disgust.⁴² On the contrary, this relativism emerges from something that is objective, which is the real relationship to the means of production embedded in a particular social context. Morality is relative to class because class is what determines the nature of one's relations to the means of production. Moreover, it is the living, breathing class which instantiates and sustains these moral views through their collective practical activity. This view is not entirely unlike the reading which Tucker, Wood and Althusser give where morality is the ideological stance of a class based on their real relations to the means of production. Where Fisk differs from these thinkers is that he thinks that Marx and Engels are actively advocating for the morality of the proletariat as the most advanced and progressive formulation of morality to date. His class relativism is supported by *Anti-Duhring*, one of the few works in which Engels explicates the moral theory which he shares with Marx. Engels argues that universal morality is only achieved in the stateless, classless society as there is no longer any class for morality to be relative to. This will mean a truly universal and human morality. Fisk faithfully incorporates this teleology into his concept of class relativism, allowing for the ultimate reconciliation of all humans with a single ideal system of morality.

Sean Sayers's theory of human nature

In *Marxism and Human Nature*, Sean Sayers gives a compelling account of Marx's theory of human nature as a form of modified Aristotelianism. In many respects, the approach by Sayers may be the closest to the one given in the later chapters of this dissertation. Like McCarthy, Levine and Fisk, Sayers views the ethics of Marx as

⁴² Fisk, 38

fundamentally Aristotelian. Moreover, like with Aristotle it follows from a theoretical reflection on human nature through the empirical study of actual human life.

Importantly, Sayers emphasizes the disanalogies between Marx and Aristotle as well, as the differences between them are as important as their similarities in understanding Marx's ethical commitments.

In the beginning of his book, Sayers focuses on two theories of human fulfillment. The first is the utilitarian hedonistic one represented by John Stuart Mill, and the second is the productive one represented by Marx. These systems have a couple major differences. First, Mill's theory is elitist due to its theory of higher pleasures and its separation between mental and physical labor, where Marx's is anti-elitist. Secondly, while Mill values consumption, Marx values production:

The current division of labour divides not only mental from manual workers, but also consumers from producers. And this latter division is also reflected - again unconsciously and uncritically - in Mill's thought, and particularly in the utilitarian theory of human nature that underlies it (30)

This is a key difference for Marx and the utilitarians, as utilitarians judge the human good in terms of the pleasure caused by "consumption" of certain goods or situations, Marx instead emphasizes the human ability to objectify themselves in their labor productively as the basis of human wellbeing and betterment. The problem with the utilitarian view is that it reduces productive activity to a mere means to consumptive ends, but on the contrary productive activity comes to define the character of human flourishing in a particular society. The kinds of things we can produce determines the kinds of things we can consume, and in a certain sense when an individual consumes, they also reproduce themselves. Religion, art, culinary science, and other more sophisticated cultural production will also reflect their distinct systems of production.

This can be seen in the reverence towards the salmon among indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest and the reverence towards the maize god among the indigenous peoples of Mexico. These foods were central parts of production and consumption.

Sayers takes on the anti-work Marxism of Gorz. Marx himself at times spoke of the basic human need for labor, and at other times presents human labor as a burden imposed by necessity that must be abolished in the future society of abundance. This debate is akin to the one between Marcuse and Fromm, where Marcuse took a hedonic approach to Marxism while Fromm took a promethean approach that valorized labor.⁴³ Sayers takes the view that there is no fundamental human nature but that it is transmuted by different material conditions. This means that *both* the need for leisure and the need for work are historically conditioned realities. The need for leisure in fact emerges as a “compliment” to the need for work, instead of as an antagonist.⁴⁴ Sayers refuses to commit to whether or not work would always be a component of human nature into the fullness of time, but instead that as far as modern man is concerned, the project of the proletariat is not “liberation from work – capitalism is doing that all too successfully by throwing millions onto the dole - but liberation of work, of the productive forces (including people), from the stultifying confines of the capitalist system (57-58).”

Sayers goes on to argue for a seemingly paradoxical position that is ultimately well-founded in Marx’s own view, which is the notion that capitalism is both destructive

⁴³ This debate is best seen in Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, where Marcuse challenges the promethean interpretation of Fromm. However, Marcuse’s criticism of Fromm is largely on Freudian grounds, not Marxist grounds.

⁴⁴ Sayers, 55

and also progressive in making possible the realization of a more ethical and humane future society. It is capitalism which produces the proletariat, and it is the proletariat who not only suffers alienation, immiseration and exploitation but has the real capacity to realize an alternative future. A proper critique of capitalism must acknowledge both the real evils it causes but also the possible good futures that these evils open up. Thus, Sayers raises an example from Marx's own writings where the conquest of India imposes great brutality on the Indian population but also led to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Sepoy Mutiny, and ultimately to Indian independence and relative unity in 1947.⁴⁵ This is not so much a rationalization or justification of the moral harms of colonialism and capitalism as a source of hope that these horrors grant the oppressed power to reshape the world.

The analytic Marxists like Geras, Cohen, and Husami are criticized by Sayers for arguing for a transcendent notion of justice in Marx. While he agrees with them that Wood's and Althusser's readings are incorrect, he thinks their alternative is similarly in disagreement with Marx's own arguments. Against the dilemma of whether Marx is a moral or scientific thinker, Sayers argues that he is both.⁴⁶ These two parts are not independent of one another but deeply intertwined. In not recognizing the intertwined character of these two parts, analytic Marxists end up distorting Marx's theory. Instead of arguing for a transcendental notion of justice in Marx that remains categorically distinct from his historically conditioned scientific analysis, Sayers advocates for a

⁴⁵ Notably, British India did not remain well unified but split into 2 independent states – India and Pakistan – and Pakistan itself later split when Bangladesh gained its independence. However, this was a far cry from the disunity and chaos which the British exacerbated and exploited to conquer India in the 18th and 19th century. Where Marx was perhaps too optimistic was his hope that British rule would decay the caste system

⁴⁶ Sayers, 112

notion of ethics fundamentally grounded in the flourishing of a socially conditioned and dynamic human nature. Human productive powers grow, and with them human needs also grow and change. This leads Sayers to advocate for a historical humanism where the growth and development of human powers is a positive value for Marx.

Sayers's reading has a number of strengths. First, he most comprehensively deals with one of the major ironies in Marx's thinking, which is that capitalism causes social degeneration but also has progressive consequences. By acknowledging this head on, he grasps the Hegelian irony in Marx's evaluative depiction of reality. Second, he does a good job of comprehensively uniting Marx's analytic, scientific and technical methods with the evaluative and prescriptive motivations and conclusions. Sayers's thought that Marx's morality centers on the flourishing of the dynamic and productive subject he describes allows him to link the two aspects intimately, without losing the significance of each.

Conclusion – the flourishing approach

The advantage of the flourishing approach is that it incorporates Marx's theory of human nature into his ethics. The flourishing approach is justified by the analogies between Aristotle's *Zoon Politikon*, and Marx's notions of human nature. It also reflects how politics and ethics are linked in both Aristotle and Marx.⁴⁷ Aristotle connects his ethics directly to the politics in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Marx sees history as a political and economic struggle between classes and society as the product of that struggle. We see the echoes of Aristotle in Marx elsewhere too, like the similarities

⁴⁷ Aristotle, Book X Chapter IX

between the moral decay caused by chrematistics for Aristotle and the dehumanization caused by alienation for the sake of profit in Marx. The Aristotelian model of morality also does not fall victim to Marx's critiques of axiomatic moral principles like the justice approach. Marx criticizes axiomatic, ahistorical moral principles as reified or alienated expressions of real concerns, while an ethics of flourishing can take historically contextualized human beings for its foundation. All ethics hitherto have been the ethics of struggling classes. Herein lies the promise of a truly universal ethics through the abolition of class itself.

Conclusion

The question of Marx's ethical position is challenging to answer, precisely because his work is sufficiently ambiguous on the topic to justify all of the above three positions. All three camps do provide at least some insight into Marx's thinking, whether or not they grasp it in its totality. The amoral approach offers insights into the critique of established morality and how morality functions as an expression of ideological hegemony. The justice approach offers insights into the way Marx derived positive norms from the conditions of the working class. Only the flourishing approach can incorporate these insights together into an interpretive totality. Yet the flourishing approach needs far more development to be a full moral theory. For one thing, the differences between Marx and Aristotle need to be identified, especially on the topic of human nature. For another, it needs to be connected to Marx's materialist theory of history and the empirical and sociological approaches he developed later in his life.

Chapter 2: Alienation and the Human Condition in the 1844 Manuscripts

When communist artisans form associations, teaching and propaganda are their first aims. But their association itself creates a new need—the need for society—and what appeared to be a means has become an end. The most striking results of this practical development are to be seen when French socialist workers meet together. Smoking, eating and drinking are no longer simply a means of bringing people together. Society, association, entertainment which also has society as its aim, is sufficient for them; the brotherhood of man is no empty phrase but a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their toilworn bodies. (Marx, 125-126).

That which exists for me through the medium of money, that which I can pay for (i.e., which money can buy), that I am, the possessor of the money. My own power is as great as the power of money. The properties of money are my own (the possessor's) properties and faculties. What I am and can do is, therefore, not at all determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy the most beautiful woman for myself. Consequently, I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness, its power to repel, is annulled by money. As an individual I am lame, but money provides me with twenty-four legs. Therefore, I am not lame. I am a detestable, dishonorable, unscrupulous and stupid man but money is honored and so also is its possessor. Money is the highest good, and so its possessor is good. (Marx, 136-137)

In the previous chapter, we saw the mainstream interpretations on Marx's ethics, and how the flourishing approach rests largely on Marx's notion of human nature. This chapter will explicate the naturalistic ontology of human nature found in the posthumously published *1844 Manuscripts*, also known as the *Paris Manuscripts*, and Marx's other early works. To have an ethics of flourishing, one needs a robust notion of human nature upon which to ground flourishing. To understand what it is for an oak tree to flourish, one must understand the nature of the oak. These manuscripts show the clearest and most explicit support for the flourishing approach as Marx lays out a theory of human flourishing and critiques capitalism for its inability to realize it. Marx takes labor to be the fundamental activity of human nature. By centering his ontology on

labor, Marx can explain human nature as a social totality of productive relationships. The promise of emancipated labor and the horror of alienated labor form the tension that underpins the manuscripts. Emancipated labor is associated with the truly flourishing and fully developed individual, whereas under alienated labor, social forces turn human nature against itself. This ontology of labor is the basis of Marx's contrast between emancipated and alienated labor. Once I have explicated the ontological and moral theories outlined in Marx's *Manuscripts*, I will show how it does not run afoul of the critique of moralism Marx offered over a year later in his *German Ideology*. I read his critique of moralism in the *German Ideology* not as a critique of morality as such, but a critique of an *approach* to morality whereby (a) one's moral system is rooted in ahistorical or transcendent axioms (the categorical imperative, principle of utility, etc.), (b) social ills are caused by evil or malicious humans instead of the other way around, and (c) evangelism for the moral system is causally efficacious in abolishing the moral problems it identifies. Finally, I will show how Marx's notion of human nature differs from Aristotle's as species-being incorporates both historicist and essentialist notions in identifying the human function in terms of social labor.

Section 1 of this chapter will cover the notion of species-being and its role in Marx's nondualist ontology. Section 2 will show how Marx derives four types of alienation prevalent within capitalism from this conception of labor. Section 3 will show how alienation inhibits human development and flourishing. Of particular interest will be the contrast between the way money turns virtue into a commodity with how labor cultivates authentic virtues. Section 4 will show how this quasi-Aristotelian notion of morality does not fall victim to the critique of "moralism" Marx later makes in the

German Ideology, which is often viewed by readers like Althusser as the sign of a conceptual break in Marx's thinking. Section 5 will discuss how Marx's notion of human nature is dynamic and sublates the distinction between historicism and essentialism. Finally, section 6 will describe how Marx's notion of species-being leads to a social notion of practical wisdom or *phronesis* which differs in form from the aristocratic and individualistic notion of the *phronimos* described by Aristotle.

Species-being and Marx's ontology of humanity

For Marx, all being except raw material nature is made by labor, and even raw material nature must be known through concepts that are produced by the human mind. First, labor produces objects. Human activity reworks natural elements and past (dead) labor of previous humans into something new. Second, labor produces the subject who labors. Marx's theory of labor thus looks not only outwards, but also inwards in that the worker is also being produced through productive and consumptive activity into a certain kind of subject. For instance, one becomes a musician by listening to and playing music. Finally, human labor produces the world as a totality of human subjects and objects. Thus, for Marx, labor in general gains an ontological significance that is unusual in the history of philosophy. Its starring role allows Marx to center our understanding of human existence not only on the theoretical labor of epistemologists, metaphysicians, moral theorists, and theologians but on the day-to-day productive activity of humanity in general.

The origins of species-being – Feuerbach, Hegel, and Aristotle

Species-being is a concept which Marx adopts from Feuerbach, and it refers to the essential nature of human beings as entities that produce and reproduce themselves

and their environment socially. Humans have the unique ability to learn the features of any resource found in nature and find possible utility in the thing. Humans also are uniquely able to learn and adopt designs and methods from other animals including fellow people. This is facilitated by the common human nature found in species-being. The concept of species-being is not theorized, like other modern theories of human nature, through a thought experiment that abstracts from real conditions. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau among others all used this method by speculating on a state of nature, often based on their observations of indigenous societies or societies during a state of civil strife. Instead, species-being must be inferred from real human existence in its totality, both its present state and in the historical record.⁴⁸

Marx's concept of species-being is rooted in Feuerbach's notion of the species, which can be found in his *Essence of Christianity*. In that book, Feuerbach argues that Christianity is an idealistic and abstract reflection of material human nature. For Feuerbach, the feature that distinguishes humans as a species from other animal species is consciousness of themselves as a species.⁴⁹ The objects of reality, be they scientific objects like planets or spiritual objects like God, are an expression of human beings,⁵⁰ and without these objects there is no human being there to express.⁵¹ These objects are shared by all conscious humans within a society, and thus they serve as an expression of their *common* humanity.⁵² Alienation occurs when these objects, manifested by human

⁴⁸ As many have noted (Jay, 1984), Marx's theory of human nature is heavily influenced by the modern philosopher Giambattista Vico's *New Science* and its historicist approach to society. His contribution to modern philosophy was in proposing that human development follows discrete stages over time.

⁴⁹ Feuerbach, 1

⁵⁰ Feuerbach, 5

⁵¹ Feuerbach, 4

⁵² Feuerbach, 20-21

thought, are treated as essentially other.⁵³ Thus, God is an expression of human beings, but is an alienated one insofar as humans take God to be their creator. Marx adopts Feuerbach's conception of alienation but alters the concept of human nature by making it socially and historically contingent and by calling attention to the role of human labor.

In addition to the explicit Feuerbachian influence, the concept of species-being is in many respects Aristotelian. In his book *From Aristotle to Marx*, Jonathan Pike shows how Marx's concept of species-being was shaped by Aristotle's distinction between actual and potential, where substances are in essence the possibilities which they come to actualize. One cannot properly conceive of the nature of the acorn without also understanding the possibility of the oak within the acorn. After all, an acorn is not only a lump of plant cells but a seed for a plant. In this example, we can also see the teleological underpinning of the actual/potential distinction:

The *telos* of the potential matter is to become actual matter, that is to say, the bare constituents of a composite tend to act against that composite and subvert its formal unity. There is therefore a need for an active unifying principle to maintain the unity of the (potential) matter and form. It is this principle that directs the further development of the organism (Pike, 42)

In the case of the acorn, the teleological principle uniting the acorn with the oak is that of the growth and reproduction of a species. As Levine notes,⁵⁴ the idea of an embedded or immanent teleology, or *entelechy*, is also how Marx understands social development. Capital, for instance, has accumulation as a *telos* embedded within its very nature without which it would not be "capital". The dynamic of actual and potential is also seen in Marx's conception of the alienated and emancipated individuals. The relationship

⁵³ Feuerbach, 27-28

⁵⁴ Levine, 256, 266

between the alienated and the fully human subject is that of the Aristotelian “actual” and “potential” in that the nature of the alienated individual is fully realized in the emancipated subject.⁵⁵ Additionally, within Marx’s revolutionary politics the potentially emancipated subject is also the *telos* of the alienated one, as the reality of alienation sets emancipation as the goal for human development.

Species-being is also ahylomorphic idea. Hylomorphism is Aristotle’s theory that substances are a combination of matter and form. Form is a way of organizing matter such that the individual is an instance of a kind. The matter itself does not undergo alterations but the form changes. In the case of the acorn, the nature of an oak does not change nor does the nature of the matter which constitutes the oak, but its form or organization does change.⁵⁶ Likewise, species-being manifests in different forms across history. Where Marx differs from Aristotle is that human nature changes within its historical and biological constraints far more drastically, where Aristotle’s perspective on what forms a substance could take were limited by his own society. For instance, Aristotle believed that slavery was natural and an inevitable consequence of human nature,⁵⁷ where for Marx humans are free to progress past forms like slavery.

Finally, species-being is a theory of second nature, or a nature that is transmuted through socialization. Aristotle conceived of second nature in terms of habit. First nature is whatever nature is found in the human organism prior to socialization, but first nature is either that which is not distinctive (biological needs) or that which is itself

⁵⁵ Meszaros, 163

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I part VI

a condition for developing both reason and habit in the first place. Marx's theory of species-being gives socialization a similar ontological significance:

The *social* character is the universal character of the whole movement; as society itself produces *man* as *man*, so it is *produced* by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their *origin*; they are *social* activity and *social* mind. (Marx, 114)

Marx's concept of second nature is a modification of Hegel's idea of *Sittlichkeit* or the ethos intrinsic to a particular way of life,⁵⁸ which is itself influenced by Aristotle's conception. Hegel says that *Sittlichkeit* appears in society as "habit" or "second nature" in his *Philosophy of Right*.⁵⁹ As Novakovic argues, the socialization of habit is a precondition for freedom in Hegel,⁶⁰ and Marx follows Hegel in understanding human freedom as a result of social development. As Marx goes on to argue, human needs and capacities are both habituated within a particular society such that they come to reflect the structure of that society. Marx's innovation is in prioritizing the role of labor in this habituation. As the nature of labor differs radically according to the different technological, social, and environmental conditions, this means that second nature too will take varied forms across history. True human freedom, then, depends first and foremost on organizing production in a way that corresponds to the development of a truly free people.

Marx's non-dualist ontology of species-being

The subjective aspect of species-being follows from two claims. First, humans relate to themselves and the things in their environment as objects that fit categories of

⁵⁸ Marx's analysis can be found in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Michael Rosen summarizes the relationship between the two concepts in his "The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology" (2000)

⁵⁹ Hegel, Section 151

⁶⁰ Novakovic, "Hegel's Real Habits"

human reason. Second, the human individual understands themselves as a member of the human species, and therefore the kind of subject able to make use of these concepts. To distinguish this notion from the activity of other animals, Marx argues that human beings have freedom in how they relate to objects within external world that they produce. Like Aristotle, Marx characterizes human nature in terms of function, which he identifies as labor.⁶¹ To demonstrate the unique function of human labor, Marx draws a distinction between the labor humans do and the labor of animals, using the example of beavers and bees (he returns to a similar example in *Capital*, as we shall see):

Of course, animals also produce. They construct nests, dwellings, as in the case of bees beavers, ants, etc. But they produce what is strictly necessary for themselves or their young. They produce only in a single direction, while man produces universally. They produce only under the compulsion of direct physical need, while man produces when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom from such need. Animals produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature. The products of animal production belong directly to their physical bodies, while man is free in the face of his product. Animals construct only in accordance with the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man knows how to produce in accordance with the standards of every species and knows how to apply the appropriate standard to the object. Thus man constructs also in accordance with the laws of beauty. (Marx, 87-88)

The disanalogy between humans and animals reveals the character of human labor. Notably, beavers, bees, ants, termites, naked mole rats, birds of paradise etc. all build complex dwellings and other structures. What they cannot do is consciously use reason to adopt, share and develop their plans socially or in a way which freely incorporates previously unused parts of nature. A bee will build a honeycomb but not a dam, while a beaver will build a dam but not a honeycomb. Humans are capable of inventing and

⁶¹ Cohen (1988) and Elster (1985) both remark on the role of functionalism in Marxist explanations of social phenomena and of humanity itself, though they also note that Marxists often deny the functionalist aspect of their theory. Cohen argues that this is due to the often-conservative implications of many forms of functionalism.

mastering both apiary science and the engineering principles behind dams and teaching them to others. Moreover, humans do this in accordance with common values such as beauty. This gives humans a *universal* relationship to nature and to productivity which other animals do not have.

The universal structure of species-being is non-dualistic in that it unites both sides of various philosophical antinomies and shows how they are intertwined moments of the same totality. This can be seen in how the concept of species-being unites the dualities of individual and species, thought and being, and subject and object. First, species-being does not subsume the individual into the collective, assert the atomic individual over the collective, or treat individual and collective as two equal but essentially distinct categories, but treats the individual and collective as entirely interdependent. It is through the species that the individual can come to express themselves and their individuality.⁶² For instance, it is because humanity created the symphony that Mozart could become a genius of classical music (and thereby also reshaping the tradition for future composers like Beethoven). Consequently, we should not posit society as an abstraction that stands against the individual but as a totality which is defined in part by the individual's inclusion within the whole:

It is above all necessary to avoid postulating “society” once again as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual *is* the *social being*. The manifestation of his life—even when it does not appear directly in the form of a communal manifestation, accomplished in association with other men—is therefore a manifestation and affirmation of *social life*. Individual human life and species-life are not *different things*, even though the mode

⁶² The role of the individual has often been overlooked in Marx's thinking, both by the critics of Marxism and by many political Marxist movements. Adam Schaff develops the individualistic themes of Marx's humanism in his *Marxism and the Human Individual*. The text represents an interesting case of a Soviet bloc Marxist philosopher uncovering the humanistic elements of the theory.

of existence of individual life is necessarily either a more *specific* or a more *general* mode of species life, or that of species-life a more *specific* or more *general* mode of individual life. (111)

Thus, the concept of species-being unites individual and collective. The collective exists in all its individual parts and their relations, and the individuals are defined in and through the collective. This relation between individual and species is possible because of thought. This does not contradict Marx's materialism so much as compliments and enriches it, as thought is not ontologically independent of material existence. In being conscious of their humanity the individual comes to understand their material, social existence in human terms, while their humanity is in turn manifested in their material existence; "In his species-consciousness man confirms his real social life and reproduces his real existence in thought; while conversely, species-life confirms itself in species-consciousness and exists for itself in its universality as a thinking being" (Marx, 111-112). The cognitive relationship between individual and society is fundamental to Marx's social mereology:

Though man is a unique individual--and it is just his particularity which makes him an individual, a really individual communal being—he is equally the whole, the ideal whole, the subjective existence of society as thought and experienced. He exists in reality as the representation and the real mind of social existence, and as the sum of human manifestation of life. (Marx, 112)

The individual is indeed unique, but the whole also serves to define the individual. A similar idea can be found in Marx's critique of Stirner's egoism when he says that Stirner's unique individual already depends on a social context.⁶³ The individual mind utilizes a shared human rationality to form their own perspective, and conversely social reason is a dynamic totality of the thought of its constitutive individual subjects. This

⁶³ Marx, 1998, 262-263

passage also shows how Marx not only unites individual and collective, but also thought and being. Marx follows Hegel in arguing for a dialectical solution to the problem of the connection between thought and being. When abstracted from social life, thought and being appear as opposed modes of being, but their distinction conceals a deeper unity. All thought is about real beings, and conversely humans come to experience beings through thought. Human labor confirms and realizes this unity through using nature to manifest ideas in material reality.

Finally, in addition to uniting collective/individual and thought/being, Marx unites subject and object in his notion of species-being. Marx argues that every person is both subject and object, and it is their objectivity which facilitates their relationship with other objects. It is only through the objective relation between the biological body and external objects that the subject exists. Yet human consciousness and subjectivity is also necessary for objectivity:

But man is not merely a natural being; he is a *human* natural being. He is a being for himself, and therefore a *species-being*; and as such he has to express and authenticate himself in being as well as in thought. Consequently, *human* objects are not natural objects as they present themselves directly, nor is *human sense*, as it is immediately and objectively *given*, *human* sensibility and human objectivity. Neither objective nature nor subjective nature is directly presented in a form adequate to the *human* being. And as everything natural must have its *origin* so *man* has his process of genesis, *history*, which is for him, however, a conscious process and thus one which is consciously self-transcending. (Marx, 150)

Thus, the various antinomies of modern philosophy are resolved within species-being.

Alienated social systems in turn shatter these unities into opposites:

Just as society at its beginnings finds, through the development of *private property* with its wealth and poverty (both intellectual and material), the materials necessary for this *cultural development*, so the fully constituted society produces man in all the plenitude of his being, the wealthy man endowed with all his senses, as an enduring reality. It is only in a social

context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity, cease to be antinomies and cease to exist as such antinomies. The resolution of the *theoretical* contradictions is possible *only* through *practical* means, only through the practical energy of man. (Marx, 114-115)

Consequently, these antinomies are products of particular social arrangements and not a universal state of affairs.⁶⁴ Individuals not alienated from their species-being experience nature and the objects of labor not through these antinomies but as an extension of themselves:

All his *human* relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, observing, feeling, desiring, acting, loving—in short all the organs of his individuality, like the organs which are directly communal in form are, in their objective action (their *action in relation to their object*) the appropriation of this object, the appropriation of human reality. The way in which they react to the object is the confirmation of *human reality*. (Marx, 119)

Thus, Marx thinks that the elimination of alienation and awareness of existence as species-being frees people to have a truly human relationship to their world, and to experience nature as an organic extension of their own self.

The production of the object

It is trivially true that human labor produces new objects from nature. The triviality of this truth conceals its philosophical significance. In Hegel's view, labor allows the subject to externalize and realize its subjective content in the world. There is some ideal within the mind that human activity brings about in external existence. The world thus comes to reflect the needs and capacities of the subject in a way which it did not before. The production of the object is how the human subject connects directly to

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Lukacs recognizes this about Marx's thinking prior to having read the *1844 Manuscripts*, arguing in his *History and Class Consciousness* that the antinomies described by Kant are a product of bourgeois ideology and that the proletariat has the power to reveal the hidden unity between these antinomies in lived human experience.

the objective world. Yet for Hegel there is something tragic in this way of linking subject and object, as now the objectified content that was previously subjective is inevitably alienated from the subject. Hegel's framework heavily influences Marx, though he fundamentally alters it by setting a sharper distinction than Hegel between objectification and alienation. For Marx, the objectification of the subject need not be alienating, assuming that human labor occurs under emancipated conditions as will be shown in section 2 of this chapter.

Work is, at first glance, the intentional creation of a thing by an individual subject. Marx views this as the objectification of the subject; "The object of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing: this product is an objectification of labor. The performance of work is at the same time its objectification" (Marx, 83). By producing the object, the worker externalizes the formal content of mind into the materials. The worker also affirms their own objectivity through their labor, as does the consumer through consumption. Hunger and the activity of cooking both confirm the objectivity of food, the people who make the food, and the person who needs food. Marx uses an analogy to the relationship between plants and the sun to explain this; "The sun is an *object*, a necessary and life-assuring object, for the plant, just as the plant is an object for the sun, an *expression* of the sun's life-giving powers" (Marx, 141). As such the production and consumption of objects also produces the objectivity of the producer and consumer. Any natural being, Marx argues, must have its nature outside of itself, and it is external relations which determines the course of a thing's development through time and space. A being without external relations is not only not objective but nonexistent, meaning objectivity as a concept is

grounded in having a relation to all other objective things. Any non-objective being would stand as a non-being, “solitary and alone” (Marx, 149). In his insightful book *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, the Hungarian Marxist István Meszaros identifies two ontological conclusions which Marx draws from this;

- (1) That the “nature” of any objective being is not some mysteriously hidden “essence” but something that naturally defines itself as the necessary relation of objective beings to its objects ...
- (2) That “having ones nature outside oneself” is the necessary mode of existence for *every* natural being, and is by no means specific about *man*. (Meszaros, 169)

By being in a context with other beings, all objective being finds its nature outside of itself the way the sun expresses its life-giving essence through the life of the plant. As such, objectification is a basic element of existence for all things, not just humanity.

The production of the subject

Labor not only produces an object and the objectivity of the individual who makes the object, but also creates the *subjectivity* of the worker. In this respect, labor for Marx represents an interdependent unity between subject and object, as both things change through the process of human labor. A worker as a self-conscious material thing is characterized not only by being but by thought. Thus, work shapes the habits of workers as well as their perspective on themselves and their world. This is not merely a change of the worker’s accidental qualities, like the fact that they are now employed, but substantively alters their basic nature as their experience shapes their character. Their objective properties change with the development of their mind and body, and their *telos* is refined as the general purpose of human nature, self-realization through labor, gains specific content through the individual mastering the production of certain kinds

of things. As such, over time work not only transforms the worker but transmutes their very substance.

Marx puts how capitalism shapes the worker as a subject and an object succinctly – “The worker produces capital and capital produces him. Thus, he produces himself, and man as a worker, as a commodity, is the product of the whole process.” (Marx, 95).

The commodification of the working subject leads to its devaluation:

The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces and the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more goods he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in the value of the world of things. Labor does not only create goods; it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces goods (Marx, 82)

As a commodity, the subject views their own value in terms of the universal medium of exchange. The commodified subject is one whose characteristics such as strength and intelligence are valued only when they are reflected in market value. As the worker produces more things for their employer, their value is reduced since the relative bargaining power of their employers increases faster than their own.

Marx again calls attention to the philosophical significance of the seemingly trivial. Aside from being birthed through literal human reproduction, the individual continues to reproduce themselves through their consumption. Therefore, the process of human reproduction continues in consumption, as by sustaining their existence the individual reproduces themselves. This move ultimately allows Marx to argue that consumption is still a productive activity. Later, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx will explicate this idea as follows:

Consumption is also immediately production, just as in nature the consumption of the elements and chemical substances is the production of the plant. It is clear that in taking in food, for example, which is a form of consumption, the human being produces his own body. But this is also true of every kind of consumption which in one way or another produces human beings in some particular aspect. Consumptive production. (Marx, 90-91)

This expanded notion of productivity allows Marx to reduce most human activity in some sense to productive activity.⁶⁵ Moreover, it clearly grounds the subject in the objective material conditions that undergird its existence.

The production of the world, and world as universal body

We have already seen how subject and object are not atomic entities whose nature is indwelling, but entities that exist in and through their relationships with each other. Marx enriches this concept by arguing that workers produce and reproduce all the parts of their world as an interrelated totality. As Adorno argues in his *Hegel: Three studies*, the core insight Marx draws from Hegel is that human beings transcend their individuality and gain their extrinsic nature through social labor.⁶⁶ Through their shared relationship with their world and their work upon it, human beings create shared purposes and reshape the world to reflect these purposes. The world that human beings produce is thus a reflection and embodiment of their shared species-being; “The practical construction of an objective world, the manipulation of organic nature, is the confirmation of man as a conscious species-being, i.e. a being who treats the species as his own being or himself as a species-being” (Marx, 87).

⁶⁵ The identity between consumption and production fills a similar role in Marx’s system to the identity between being and non-being in Hegel’s *Logic*. Like in Hegel’s *Logic*, the moment of difference is as essential as the moment of their identity. As Marx argues, citing Storch’s response to J.B. Say, the difference between productivity and consumption is revealed in economic growth, as productivity exceeds consumption. Economic growth is as much an essential feature to capitalism as the fact that all production is in some way also consumption.

⁶⁶ Adorno, 18

Marx introduces a radical notion of embodiment into this conception of the world, which is another way in which he turns Hegel on his head. Much as spirit takes the form of a universal subject in the idealist system of Hegel, for Marx the entire world is the body of humanity as species-being. It is divided between organic body, or the real human animal itself, and the inorganic body or the wider natural environment:

Species-life, for man as for animals, has its physical basis in the fact that man (like animals) lives from inorganic nature, and since man is more universal than an animal so the range of inorganic nature from which he lives is more universal. ... The universality of man appears in practice in the universality which makes the whole of nature into his inorganic body: (1) as a direct means of life; and equally (2) as the material object and instrument of his life activity. Nature is the *inorganic body* of man; that is to say, nature excluding the human body itself. To say that man lives from nature means that nature is his body with which he must remain in a continuous interchange in order not to die. (Marx, 86)

This is a collective body, as no individual operates it on their own, but is a shared body for humanity. The economy is an organic and inorganic totality which incorporates the productivity of the many individuals in a society. This body as a totality incorporates material human history. As István Mészáros says, the inorganic body is “the concrete expression and embodiment of a historically given stage and structure of productive activity in the form of its products, from material goods to works of art” (Mészáros, 81).

The embodied interdependence between humanity and nature is possible because humans are a part of nature instead of separate from it; “The statement that the physical and mental life of man, and nature, are interdependent means simply that nature is interdependent with itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx, 88).

The idea of humanity as having a collective body in the form of the world which they build reveals something like a secular equivalent to pantheism in Marx’s thought. In pantheism, God is viewed as pervading all parts of reality, and therefore God

represents reality as a totality of all things instead of a figure standing outside the world. This means that to know God, we must understand the connections of all things within the world. For Marx, it is not God pervading all of reality but instead productive humanity. To understand humanity, we need to understand the relationships between the various seemingly atomic parts of our world. This is one way in which Marx's early writings are particularly humanistic, in that he focuses his attention on the world which humans create for themselves. Frantz Fanon develops Marx's idea of a socially structured subjectivity by applying it to race in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. For both Marx and Fanon, the structure of the world as a social production must be understood to comprehend human nature at a particular moment in history. In Fanon's case, it reveals the historically contingent character of supposedly essential differences between racial groups. One does not understand human nature if one thinks that the lower educational level among certain ethnic minorities is an essential part of their nature as a different "kind" of human, instead of something produced by the structure of the world we inhabit. In Marx's case, understanding the world reveals the social and historical contingency of economic relations and the nature which those relations depend on.

The four types of capitalist alienation

Marx distinguishes four specific kinds of alienation which emerge under capitalist relations; alienation from the object, alienation from the process of production, alienation from species-being, and alienation from other subjects.⁶⁷ These

⁶⁷ It is important to recognize the connection between alienation and misery, but not to conflate them. Alienation in all its four forms is strongly correlated with miserable conditions like poverty and powerlessness. However, they are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for

represent the worker's alienation from their world, though there are other forms of alienation not specific to workers. Alienation is a structural relationship between subject and object. It is closely related to objectification but is not the same thing. As Marx reads Hegel⁶⁸, alienation follows objectification as once the subject objectifies its subjective content, that content is no longer its own but gains a kind of independence from the subject. Once their subjective content has become an object, it is external to the subject and therefore the subject's creation confronts them as an alien force. The only solution to alienation for Hegel is the development of the subject towards a theoretical and conceptual reconciliation between it and its objective world. The realization of this is what Hegel calls absolute knowing. Marx instead sees alienation as a consequence of social hierarchies instead of the process of objectification as such.

The most basic form of alienation is the alienation from the object being produced.⁶⁹ Once the worker's labor is done, the object they have produced is the property of the other who sells it as a commodity. As Mészáros shows, this form of alienation emerges with the extension of salability through increasing portions of the

one another. Non-alienated labor can produce misery. For example, domestic labor that does not happen under the force of patriarchy (say, a college student cleaning their dorm after a party) can still be miserable but is not alienated labor as the work one does is work on one's own environment and in accordance with their one's own needs and reason. Also, the force of nature can impose various forms of labor that are not strictly alienated but still produce misery, such as the strenuous effort made to save others or oneself during a natural disaster. While nature often does confront man as an alien force under such conditions, it is not, strictly speaking, "alienated" as the natural forces behind disasters were never ours to begin with. Alternatively, alienated labor can frequently be enjoyable for the worker, and at least in the short term not cause any misery at all. In fact, the pleasure a worker might experience may conceal their alienation. Naturally, this does not mean that alienation doesn't have a very noticeable tendency to produce misery, even among those who do love their job. While Marx does not address this explicitly, Marcuse develops this argument from Marx's conceptual framework in his *One Dimensional Man*.

⁶⁸ Marx, 145

⁶⁹ Marx, 83

world.⁷⁰ The second form of alienation is from the process of labor.⁷¹ Alienated labor confronts humans as an obligation to an alien force as the employer is the one who defines the conditions under which labor takes place. Workers only have a say in where they work, and even that is not a truly free choice as workers must find employment of one type or another to live. The third form of alienation is the alienation of human beings from species-being.⁷² Labor is the life activity most characteristic of humans as species-being, but as humans are alienated from labor as an activity they are also alienated from their nature as species-being. Instead of a nature that is free to develop in various socially and personally enriching ways, alienated human nature confronts humans in a reified form that is set in stone. The final form of alienation described in the *Manuscripts* is the alienation of individuals from one another.⁷³ As alienation from the object causes alienation from labor as life activity and as alienation from life activity causes alienation from species-being, alienation from species-being causes alienation of individuals from one another.⁷⁴ All four notions of alienation are merely different moments of the same process. As species-being is characterized by the social production of both the objective world and ourselves as subjects, alienation from species-being entails the other three moments. This limitation of human nature appears to be a part of human nature itself to those whose consciousness of the world is limited to capitalist social relations.

⁷⁰ Mészáros, 35

⁷¹ Marx, 85

⁷² Marx, 88

⁷³ Marx, 88

⁷⁴ This goes back to Marx's early writings in *Rheinische Zeitung* where he described the abuses faced by German peasants collecting their fuel needs (Marx, "Debates on Law on Theft of Wood", 1842, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*).

Alienation, human flourishing, and ethics

The question remains, is there is an ethical content contained within the system of human nature described by Marx? If the answer is affirmative, this would not necessarily undermine either Althusser's or Tucker's and Wood's claims, as both can minimize the philosophical importance of these earlier works for Marxist philosophy (as Althusser himself does). Yet if it does contain ethical concerns and we can see these concerns reflected explicitly or implicitly in his later works, then in fact the ethical importance of alienation becomes essential to understanding Marx's ethics. This section will look at the impact of alienation on both workers and capitalists, and how it inhibits their development and flourishing. It will also look at how this inhibition on flourishing motivates Marx's works, and how he seems to think it will similarly motivate workers to see the evils caused by capitalism within their own lives.

The development and deformation of human needs

Central to Marx's account of human flourishing is the development of needs. Flourishing is not about meeting base animal needs but cultivating existing and new needs and securing the material capacity to meet those needs. The development of new needs is a consequence of the universal character of species-being, as no individual is limited only to the needs they have already cultivated. New needs enrich human life by creating new means of expression and self-realization. For instance, the invention of the stage and modern European theater created both thespian craft and the enjoyment of theater among the audience. There are two processes by which needs develop. First, our animal needs can be cultivated or refined through the development of taste and preference. In the case of the need for food, this reflects the ability to procure new

flavors and recipes as well as the ability to appreciate these new tastes. Second, new needs can be generated by social development, such as the aforementioned need for theatrical entertainment. Both cases can represent what Marx describes as the truly human development of needs that enriches human life. In emancipated conditions, the need isn't only in the consumption of these goods but also their production. Hence, the development of new consumptive needs (say, the desire of the theater audience) also indicates the development of new productive needs (the actor's desire to master their craft and entertain the audience).⁷⁵

Alienation disrupts the process of development of needs, however. As we have seen, through alienation from the process of production, workers come to be treated as machines. As machines, the only needs that are recognized are those necessary for survival. Consequently, workers are generally reduced to meeting base animal needs:

First, by reducing the needs of the worker to the miserable necessities required for the maintenance of his physical existence, and by reducing his activity to the most abstract mechanical movements, the economist asserts that man has no needs, for activity or enjoyment, beyond that; and yet he declares that this kind of life is a human way of life (Marx, 121).

In fact, the development of higher needs is seen by capitalists as wasteful, and asceticism is presented as a value;

Secondly, by reckoning as the general standard of life (general because it is applicable to the mass of men) the most impoverished life conceivable, he turns the worker into a being who has neither senses nor needs, just as he turns his activity into a pure abstraction from all activity. Thus all working class luxury seems to him blameworthy, and everything which goes beyond the most abstract need (whether it be a passive enjoyment or a manifestation of personal activity) is regarded as a *luxury*. (Marx, 121)

⁷⁵ Elster provides an excellent description of the interrelated development of productive and consumptive needs and shows how “capacities” in turn can become “needs” for Marx (Elster 2.2.4)

The ascetic impulse goes beyond the worker and imposes itself on the capitalist himself as the capitalist is compelled to save for the purpose of accumulation. Marx describes this as the basis of the “ascetic but usurious miser and the ascetic but productive slave” (Marx, 121).

Human flourishing in the 1844 Manuscripts

The flourishing subject is developed as old needs are met and new needs are cultivated.⁷⁶ For this to occur, society must create a wealth of realizable needs on the part of the individual:

We have seen what importance should be attributed, in a socialist perspective, to the *wealth* of human needs, and consequently also to a *new mode of production* and to a new *object* of production. A new manifestation of *human* powers and a new enrichment of the human being. (Marx, 119)

The socialist society has the end of creating new values and needs and producing the means to fill these needs. Capitalism only produces new needs or values insofar as it is instrumentally advantageous to capital. In socialism, workers not only produce valuable objects, but they know and recognize the positive meaning of these objects for themselves and others. Their motivation is not raw coercion but the knowledge of the real and tangible good being produced. Marx offers brief windows into what a proletarian form of flourishing might look like:

When communist *artisans* form associations, teaching and propaganda are their first aims. But their association itself creates a new need—the need for society—and what appeared to be a means has become an end. The most striking results of this practical development are to be seen when French socialist workers meet together. Smoking, eating and drinking are no longer simply a means of bringing people together. Society, association, entertainment which also has society as its aim, is sufficient for them; the

⁷⁶ Agnes Heller provides an excellent description of Marx’s theory of social needs in her *The Theory of Need in Marx*. Her central thesis is that for Marx, needs are not merely natural but are enriched and developed through social change.

brotherhood of man is no empty phrase but a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their toilworn bodies. (Marx, 125-126).

Marx views the nobility of these workers as an expression of their cooperative and productive virtues, and therefore as an expression of the most noble aspects of human nature. Capital views workers as a means to the ends of capital accumulation, but through their productive relations with one another workers come to turn their social relations into an end in itself. We see how workers pursuing their collective interests reframe their social activity as prefigurative of a non-alienated society and how they posit alternative virtues. Their social activity is now an autonomous expression of their class and not characterized by alienation, at least within these spaces. These are not fully emancipated workers but alienated workers experiencing momentary emancipation.

The passage on money and corrupted “virtue”

A stark opposition to the authentic nobility of the toilworn socialist workers is Marx’s depiction of the corrupt and cynical notions of virtue and flourishing within the capitalist concept of value. Though often overlooked, Marx’s section on money is critical for anyone aiming to understand Marx’s ethics. Marx opens the passage by drawing out the ontological relationship between passions and their object. Passions are, ontologically speaking, affirmations of human existence based on a sensuous relation between subject and object. From this, Marx concludes five theses: first, human passions have distinct forms of gratification depending on their object; second, consumption of the object affirms its existence; third, in truly human relations, another’s consumption is also one’s own gratification; fourth, industrial society reveals the ontological structure of human passion in its totality; and finally, in alienated

societies, the aim of private property is human enjoyment or enrichment.⁷⁷ These theses are relevant in revealing the ontological structure of human consumption and its relation to human passions in general such that Marx can set up money as the universal mediator between consumer and consumed. Industrial society leads to the development of new passions and forms of human enjoyment, yet money increasingly mediates the objects of desire. The ability of money to become almost any other object humans can produce makes money the “*object par excellence*” (Marx, 135).

Marx cites the Goethe’s *Faust* and Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* in his exploration of money. Faust describes how his ownership over stallions grants him their power – if he has six horses, he has their twenty four feet. Timon describes how gold is the “common whore of mankind” with which its possessor can exchange for anything within human capacities to produce and with any willing seller. Gold as currency is both a “defiler” and a “visible God”, says Timon, referencing its power to both corrupt social relations and to fulfill any egoistical need of its possessor. Marx says these passages describe the true nature of money as an object with the capacity to take ownership over the capacities of others:

That which exists for me through the medium of *money*, that which I can pay for (i.e., which money can buy), that *I am*, the possessor of the money. My own power is as great as the power of money. The properties of money are my own (the possessor’s) properties and faculties. What I *am* and *can do* is, therefore, not at all determined by my individuality (Marx, 136)

Here we see the mystical power of money in the ability to grant its possessor the power made manifest by other individuals, even if those powers are not my own. This means

⁷⁷ Marx, 134-135

that even if an individual lacks a particular virtue, they can leverage their money to negate the practical consequences of that lack:

I *am* ugly, but I can buy the *most beautiful* woman for myself. Consequently, I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*, its power to repel, is annulled by money. As an individual I am *lame*, but money provides me with twenty-four legs. Therefore, I am not lame. I am a detestable, dishonorable, unscrupulous and stupid man but money is honored and so also is its possessor. Money is the highest good, and so its possessor is good. (Marx, 136-137)

Money therefore negates the physical limitations like ugliness or weakness, making someone effectively attractive or powerful even if they are not in substance. It is not that these physical limitations are no longer there as the ugly person does not become literally handsome, but money has nonetheless negated the social consequences of ugliness. As well as physical limitations, money also negates the social and material costs of vice for the individual, as the power of money demands respect whether the possessor is virtuous or vicious. One way money can achieve this is by employing others who do have real or apparent virtue:

I am *stupid*, but since money is the *real mind* of all things, how should its possessor be stupid? Moreover, he can buy talented people for himself, and is not he who has power over the talented more talented than they? I who can have, through the power of money, everything for which the human heart longs, do I not possess all human abilities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their opposites? (Marx, 137)

In other words, money not only frees the individual from their individual limitations but allows the possessor to appropriate the virtue of others by buying their labor.

Money functions as the alienated embodiment of the power of species-being. Where emancipated species-being frees individuals to benefit from the benefits of society, money grants this power to individuals who possess money. It therefore serves as both a bond and as a force of separation; it binds the individual to human life, society

to the individual, and the individual to nature and humanity, but simultaneously serves to separate those things through alienation.⁷⁸ As George Novack quips, the “money form of wealth stands like a whimsical tyrant between the needs of men and their fulfillment” (Novack, 70). Hence Marx says that it is the “Galvano-chemical” power of society which reveals two properties of money identified by Shakespeare:

- (1) It is the visible deity, the transformation of all human and natural qualities into their opposites, the universal confusion and inversion of all things; it brings incompatibles into fraternity;
- (2) It is the universal whore, the universal pander between men and nations.
(Marx 137)

In the first point, money is a corrupting influence which can invert good and bad and unite otherwise incompatible and antagonistic social forces. One notable example is the process of reputation laundering where exploitative capitalists give their ill-gotten gains to charity, thereby purchasing the appearance of virtue with their blood money. In the second point, money becomes the power by which to obtain anything for one’s own purposes, whether virtuous or vicious.

In an earlier passage, Marx describes money as the unique ends of humanity within capitalism.⁷⁹ Marx compares this to the relationship of the individual to the sword under feudalism, or the horse under nomadism. The sword represents freedom in the feudal world, as in feudalism freedom is gained through honor. Within the nomadic society it is the horse which facilitates freedom by allowing for the mobility necessary to thrive. Similarly, the lack of money is a lack of freedom within capitalist society. Marx notes that even though the modern worker dwells in a cellar not unlike the cavern of

⁷⁸ Marx, 137

⁷⁹ Marx, 126

paleolithic man, the modern man perceives this home as an alien one unlike the paleolithic dwelling. This is for two reasons – first, the slum dwelling requires payments of rent which drain the minimal income of the worker, and second, because the worker knows full well that their society can produce great wealth:

Instead, he finds himself in *another person's* house, the house of a *stranger* who lies in wait for him every day and evicts him if he does not pay the rent. He is also aware of the contrast between his own dwelling and a human dwelling such as exists in *that other world*, the heaven of wealth. (Marx, 126).

In other words, money is both wealth and freedom of its possessor and the poverty and bondage of those without it.

In another passage, Marx offers a fundamentally ethical critique of the alienation caused by the possession or lack of money. Alienation causes both dependency and dehumanization:

Alienation is apparent not only in the fact that *my* means of life belong to *someone else*, that *my* desires are the unattainable possession of *someone else*, but that everything is *something different* from itself, that my activity is *something else*, and finally (and this is also the case for the capitalist) that *an inhuman power* rules over everything. (Marx, 126)

Alienation means not only dependence on alien interests but also that an inhuman and reified force governs human relations. Under capitalism, the productivity and sociability characteristic of human freedom and flourishing as well as the objects that facilitate productivity becomes the source of bondage and immiseration. Capital is not only an alien force to the workers, but also to the capitalists who must work to grow their capital lest they fall into immiseration too. Conversely, money grants a “right” over the labor of others, which can be seen in the lifestyles of bohemians, aristocrats, and others whose primary economic activity is consumptive:

There is a kind of wealth which is inactive, prodigal and devoted to pleasure, the beneficiary of which *behave* as an *ephemeral*, aimlessly active individual who regards the slave labor of others, human *blood and sweat*, as the prey of his cupidity and sees mankind, and himself, as a sacrificial and superfluous being. Thus he acquires a contempt for mankind, expressed in the form of arrogance and the squandering of resources which would support a hundred human lives, and also in the form of the infamous illusion that his unbridled extravagance and endless unproductive consumption is a condition for the *labor* and *subsistence* of others. (Marx, 126-127)

Perversely, the bohemian holder of money comes to conclude that their extravagance keeps the worker alive by providing them employment. Yet his consumption is the aimless and arbitrary expression of the productive power of others, as he “regards the realization of the *essential powers* of man only as the realization of his own disorderly life, his whims and his capricious, bizarre ideas” (127). The bohemian individual has not realized their own humanity by expressing themselves productively, as they are merely an impotent mirror of the humanity of others.⁸⁰

Marx clearly describes the world dominated by money as a morally corrosive condition. It grants the social effects and benefits of real virtue to those who do not hold those virtues due to their power over others. It leads to moral confusion and social disruption through the empowerment of the wealthy. Marx thusly argues that money “changes fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, stupidity into intelligence and intelligence into stupidity” (Marx, 138). The presentation of virtue under capitalism is a grotesque caricature of virtue and wisdom. Marx even suggests that the coward can purchase bravery – which is

⁸⁰ Michael Morris provides a more detailed account of the 19th century bohemians through Stirner and contrasts their critique of capitalism with Marx's (145-160). The central takeaway is that Stirner and other bohemians critique existing social systems from an individualistic concern with their boredom and personal dissatisfaction, and resolves itself into a kind of mercurial and arbitrary hedonism that is, on a deeper level, perfectly consistent with capitalism.

to say, pay another person to be courageous and possibly die for them. Money can purchase *anything* within the scope of human capacity and bind it entirely to the ends of the individual. Hence it alienates and corrupts human virtues, capacities and relationships by turning them from real human powers into commodities.

Truly human bonds

Marx ends his section on money by contrasting the alienated relationship between individual and world mediated by money, and truly human relations. Truly human relations are characterized by an emancipated relationship between an individual and their species-being. The world is now an expression of truly human powers, and people's needs and capacities are no longer mediated by the commodity relation. The development of the individual is also no longer mediated by money, meaning the person can cultivate themselves fully:

Let us assume *man* to be *man*, and his relation to the world to be a human one. Then love can only be exchanged for love, trust for trust, etc. If you wish to enjoy art you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you wish to influence other people you must be a person who really has a stimulating and encouraging effect upon others. Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual life*. If you love without evoking love in return, i.e., if you are not able, by the manifestation of yourself as a loving person, to make yourself a *beloved person*, then your love is impotent and a misfortune. (Marx, 139).

There are three related conclusions in this passage. First, truly human moral relations between people require reciprocity. If one acts with love towards others, others should love the individual back. This recalls Aristotle's theory of friendship, where true friendship (as opposed to the friendship of utility and of pleasure) is a non-instrumental

relationship of mutual respect and care between rational and virtuous parties.⁸¹ This contrasts with the relation mediated by money, which is the moral equivalent of an unrequited instrumental relationship – one person receives love, while the other person receives money. Second, if one is socialized within an emancipated society, then moral development is “fully human”. All individuals are free to cultivate characteristics like artistic taste and interpersonal charisma. Their characteristics in turn bring about the ability to realize cultivated human needs, such as the enjoyment of art and the social stimulation of others. Hence development is a symbiotic process whereby the individual develops new needs as well as the ability to realize these needs in oneself and others. Third, when the individual has a truly human relationship to the world, their powers are a real expression of their cultivated individuality.

The conclusion for Marx is clear. There are truly human conditions where people have the capacity to develop their capacities and needs. The development of needs and capacities is the ultimate end of human life as a process of self-enrichment. Then there is a contrasting situation where the individual instead benefits from virtues of others, turning these virtues into instrumental means to be leveraged by those who possess wealth. Ironically, it is the very world-building capacity of humanity which creates a world dominated by money and private interest. Flourishing and alienation are both possible paths of human nature, and one of these states of being is unambiguously preferable to the other. This addresses a debate among those readers of Marx who identify an Aristotelian influence on his work. Jonathan Pike criticizes McCarthy for thinking that Aristotle’s influence on Marx was primarily ethical, instead arguing that

⁸¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII ch iii

Aristotle's influence on Marx was primarily ontological.⁸² Where McCarthy argues that Marx is primarily influenced by Aristotle's notion of human self-realization and flourishing, Pike argues that Marx instead developed his ontology of value and exchange from Aristotle. Yet in this reading we've seen that ethical conclusions regarding the flourishing life are derived from Marx's ontology, much as Aristotle derives his ethics from his notion of human nature. Pike's reading of the ontology of the manuscripts is insightful, but he overlooks important structural parallels between the ethics of Aristotle and Marx when he argues that "when Marx uses material from the *Nichomachean Ethics*, it is the discussion of exchange that he employs rather than the more broad discussion of the good life for man" (Pike, 88).

Marx's critique of moralism and his ethics of alienation

One challenge to the view that the *1844 Manuscripts* expresses a moral view on the part of Marx, and that this moral view permeates his later work, is that Marx unequivocally rejects "moralists" in other early works like the *German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*. In these books, Marx blasts those who think that socio-economic emancipation emerges from moral theory. Moralism is presented as mere ideology and obfuscation that distracts from the material relations that must be changed. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Althusser views *The German Ideology* as the break in Marx's thinking between the early humanist and moralist thinker and the later scientific Marx. Wood also cites this text as evidence that Marx rejects moral philosophy as mere ideology.⁸³ I argue, though, that this is a rejection of moral polemic as either theoretically insightful or practically efficacious, not that Marx rejects the notion that

⁸² Pike, 87

⁸³ Wood, 1981, 128

emancipation, socialism and communism would present morally superior and more humane ways of living.

It does seem at first glance that Marx rejects the tendency of thinkers like Proudhon or the German “True socialists” for doing morality when they should have been doing economic science. However, the target is more precise. What Marx really is rejecting is an ahistorical notion of morality that is an abstraction from the existing material conditions of society. As Marx says in *The German Ideology*, morality like politics, language, law and so on is a human creation,⁸⁴ yet this human creation becomes a reified standard by which to blame the world’s problems on the evil of other individuals. Though he routinely criticizes moralists who reify their moral principles, Marx does not condemn morality as such. Marx’s distinction between moralism and morality is seen in a passage in the *1844 Manuscripts* where he argues that moralism is an expression of alienated social conditions, as the morality of the moralist has become divorced from real life and stands above it as a transcendent judge. Moralists and political economists stand against one another with contrary notions of the good. Marx asks, “whom then should we believe, the economist or the moralist?” (Marx, 123). Moralist critics of capitalism condemn its excesses such as prostitution,⁸⁵ and promises “riches of a good conscience, of virtue, etc.” (Marx, 123) but Marx notes that good deeds cannot guarantee human flourishing; “... how can I be virtuous if I am not alive and how can I have a good conscience if I am not aware of anything?” (Marx, 123). Thus the moralist privileges morality over economics in a way which is self-defeating. Political

⁸⁴ Marx, 42

⁸⁵ Marx refers to the “nth hour of work”, or the time in which the wives and daughters of French workers must prostitute themselves to make ends meet (Marx, 123)

economists preach a different morality, Marx argues, of “gain, work, thrift and sobriety” (Marx, 123) and they consequently promise to satisfy needs. Yet this morality serves the purposes of the current economic system, and only satisfies needs insofar as they serve the ends of accumulation. Marx goes on to stress that the failure of both the political economist and the moralist is that they understand economics and morality as alienated and incommensurable:

The nature of alienation implies that each sphere applies a different and contradictory norm, that morality does not apply the same norm as political economy, etc., because each of them is a particular alienation of man; each is concentrated upon a specific area of alienated activity and is itself alienated from the other. (Marx, 123).

The failure of the moralist and the economist alike is their tendency to view morality and economics as not only distinct fields of inquiry, but as independent dimensions of human existence which stand in judgement of one another. As alienated subjects of inquiry, one can only come to prioritize morality or economic instrumentality over the other.

Not all morality is of the type Marx criticizes here and in the *German Ideology*. Notably, Aristotle’s account of virtue incorporates the influence of economic conditions.⁸⁶ Consequently, economics and ethics are not categories alien to each other for Aristotle but are deeply intertwined. Moreover, Aristotle explicitly rejects absolute, decontextualized norms of justice, as these are abstractions from the real concrete moral circumstances in which people find themselves.⁸⁷ The only exceptions that Aristotle makes are norms against adultery, murder and theft.⁸⁸ Instead of defending

⁸⁶ Aristotle, 2017, Book VII

⁸⁷ Aristotle, 2004, Book II chapter vi 1106a-1106b

⁸⁸ Aristotle, 2004, Book II chapter vi 1107a

transcendent norms, Aristotle instead goes about describing human nature, and contrasts the virtuous and flourishing individual with the vicious individual. The vice of the vicious individual cannot be solved by theoretical education, as even the achievement of knowledge does not necessarily lead to virtue as with the person with *akrasia* (incontinence).⁸⁹ *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, determines the right action out of a process of contextualized deliberation, instead of the derivation of abstract universal principles.⁹⁰ Hence, the solution to vice is moral education which habituates virtue in the individual.⁹¹ Likewise, the *1844 Manuscripts* provides a moral vision centered on flourishing over the adherence to abstract and ahistorical norms. Fisk describes this position as ethical naturalism, and gives it two precepts:

I Ethical life and all that on which it depends is totally encompassed within the universe of people, their groups, and the material things they use.
...

II Human nature is the ultimate basis for the origin, the authority, and the validity of ethical principles. (Fisk, 21)

Both the source and the solution to the moral problem of alienation is social and material. The social problems caused by money cannot be solved by convincing people that money is bad according to transcendent moral principles because as harmful as money might be, it is a necessity within the social and economic conditions in which people find themselves. Even if money is identified as a cause of human corruption and alienation, it may be impossible to wholly do away with it or something like it until a combination of general abundance and solidarity means exchange relations are no longer necessary.

⁸⁹ Aristotle, 2004, Book VII

⁹⁰ Aristotle, 2004, Book VI chapter v

⁹¹ Aristotle, 2004, Book X chapter ix

The issue for Marx is that moral polemics are both theoretically inaccurate and practically impotent. They are theoretically inaccurate because the causes of alienation like money were not invented due to human evil but were consequences of historical development. Money originates from the need of different communities to exchange, not the need for individuals to dominate or exploit one another. Moral polemics are practically impotent for three related reasons. First, their theoretical inaccuracy inhibits their practical value. Secondly, they are ineffective because they do not address the real material conditions behind what they criticize. Finally, the success of a moral argument will hinge on the already existing ideology and customs of the interlocutor, meaning individuals who have bought in to the basic moral premises underpinning liberal capitalism will probably not be moved by a moral condemnation of capitalism. None of this is to say that we cannot theoretically explicate the moral harms caused by alienation and the humanization caused by emancipation. It is just to say that the problem of alienation cannot be addressed by evangelism for a moral principle that holds that the cause of alienation is human evil.

A major failure of transcendental moral theories which Marx identifies in the *German Ideology* is their tendency to hypostatize certain possible attributes or motives for action. Such an approach to morality treats historically contingent ways of being as the fundamental attribute of human nature, or as universally good regardless of historical context. This is a mistake which Marx attributes to figures like Stirner, Bentham, Mill and others. They abstract from history to propose narrow and universal conceptualizations of human nature. This differs from Marx's notion of human nature which centers around the polyform and historically contingent notion of work and

human needs. The debate between altruism and egoism is a paradigmatic example for Marx. Bentham takes egoistic hedonism to be the basic human attitude and mutually beneficial exchange as the paradigmatic human relationship. These are the most fundamental expressions of basic human nature for Bentham. This informs his theory of the principle of utility, where the good is in pleasure and the bad in pain. Utilitarianism tries to balance out utility across society, and this justifies the act of exchange as a means to meet the individual's own needs. This view hypostatizes the relationship which individuals have with one another in a marketplace by making that historically contingent relationship into the fundamental aspect of human nature.

If we look closely at the passage from *The German Ideology* where Marx insists that Communists “do not preach morality” (Marx, 264), the target is clearly those hypostatize one human trait over its opposite:

Communism is quite incomprehensible to our saint because the communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism, nor do they express this contradiction theoretically either in its sentimental or in its highflown ideological form; they rather demonstrate its material source, with which it disappears of itself. (Marx, 264)

The main difference between Stirner and Bentham for Marx is that where Stirner embraces egoistic nature as a good, Bentham tries to subject it to a transcendent ethical ideal of collective utility to forge egoistic nature into something “good”. Opposed to both Utilitarian and Stirnerite versions of egoism are those who insist that true human nature is altruistic, and that egoism is a kind of fallen state. Yet as we do not live in an altruistic society, altruism commits itself to a utopian and ideological dualism by posing a real world against the false one in which we live.⁹² Marx sees human nature as expressing

⁹² Mészáros, 165

contrary tendencies, instead of hypostatizing and reifying a particular historical moment of the human condition:

In Marx's view, this kind of superimposition is only possible because we live in an alienated society where man is *de facto* egoistic. To identify the egoistic (alienated) man of a given historical situation with man in general and thus conclude that man is by nature egoistic is to commit the "ideological fallacy" of unhistorically equating the part (i.e. that which corresponds to a *partial* interest with the *whole*. The outcome is, inevitably, a fictitious man who readily lends himself to this transcendental superimposition. (Mészáros 81).

Human nature expresses itself in potentially opposite ways in different contexts and socializations. This is a logical consequence of Marx's concept of species-being. Recall that for Marx, species-being is universal and free, meaning human nature is free to adopt opposed ways of being in different circumstances. This is not to say species-being is free to develop regardless of biological or historical conditions. There are some possible modes of existence not available to human species-being, such as a hive mind, freedom from sleep, or immortality. Other modes of existence can be realized, but only when mediated through technology (for instance, sonar giving people the capacity to echolocate) or through intense individual discipline (for instance, the development of extended lung capacity among free divers). Marx is therefore not saying something as absurd as that human nature can develop with absolute freedom, but that human nature is not reducible to a static essence.

Marx not only thinks that the individual has the possibility of realizing contrary possibilities, but that these possibilities don't carry any normative weight in themselves:

They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definitive circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals. Hence, the communists by no means want, as Saint Max believes, and as his loyal *Dottore Graziano* (Arnold Ruge) repeats

after him ... to do away with the “private individual” for the sake of the “general”, selfless man. (Marx, 264)

This stands in contrast to the vulgar view that understands “communism” to be a moral defense of collectivist selflessness *par excellence* – Stirner’s critique of communism is based on such a strawman.⁹³ Instead, selfishness and selflessness are legitimate human responses to different contexts. These motives can coexist happily in ideal circumstances. For instance, workers who take the risk of striking are serving their own ends and the ends of their comrades. The individual is self-mediating, which is to say that it can take up different qualities as the need arises:

The Marxian “Self-mediated being of nature and of man”—man who is not the animal counterpart of a set of abstract moral ideals—is by nature neither good, nor evil; neither benevolent nor malevolent; neither altruistic nor egoistic; neither sublime nor a beast; etc., but simply a natural being whose attribute is: “self-mediating”. This means that he can *make* himself become what he is at any given time—in accordance with the prevailing circumstances—whether egoistic or otherwise. (Mészáros, 164)

It is in this context that Marx insists that communists do not preach morality – they do not aim to moralize for or against behavior that is perfectly prudent under certain material conditions. Notably, Marx’s views on egoism and altruism share much of Aristotle’s idea of a virtuous golden mean. For Aristotle, virtue is not found in consistent egoism or altruism, but instead in the disposition to prudently balance self-interest and interest in others. Vice, on the other hand, is the disposition to remain at one of the extremes. Likewise, a rational and ethical individual may find themselves variously having to attend to their own interests and the interests of others. Extreme avarice and pathological selflessness are still vicious. Beyond the cases of extreme individual

⁹³ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 225

corruption or ascetic levels of selflessness however, Marx understands that self-interest and altruism can both be rational and necessary for human flourishing.

Marx certainly thinks that the social and economic agenda he defended would create a world that enriches the proletariat, but a moral critique of exploitation will not liberate the workers. Instead, communists must expose the real material conditions that frame human action and how these conditions emerged as historical developments:

Communist theoreticians, the only communists who have time to devote to the study of history, are distinguished precisely by the fact that they have alone *discovered* that throughout history the “general interest” is created by individuals who are defined as “private persons”. (Marx, 264)

The theoretical consequence of this, as Mészáros identifies, is that Marx is interested in the historical rationality underpinning egoism (as well as altruism):

If the “self-mediating” being can turn himself into what he is under determinate circumstances and in accordance with them, and if we find that egoism is just as much a fact of human life as benevolence, then the task is to find out: what are the reasons why man made himself become a being who behaves egoistically. (Mészáros, 88)

This leads to a descriptive approach to social and moral problems that we will see return in *Capital* but was also seen in the *1844 Manuscripts* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Marx describes the real barriers to human flourishing and how these barriers are created by humans themselves, instead of being either condemned or justified by a reified human nature. This distinction is echoed much later by Engels in his *The Housing Question*, where he reproaches Mühlberger as one who “preaches” and “laments” over the injustice of social ills instead of describing their actual social and material origins like the German scientific socialists such as himself and Marx.⁹⁴ Any

⁹⁴ Engels, 88

prescriptive approach needs to be responsive to the actual conditions on the ground, much as Aristotle's *phronesis* determines right action through contextualized deliberation instead of the application of transcendent principle.⁹⁵ Marx thus does not want to abolish morality, but to abolish the antinomy between morality and political economy.

The Marxist conception of human nature vs the Aristotelian conception

The question of whether Marx has an essentialist or a historicist view of human nature is a significant part of the debate on Marx's ethics. There are three positions on the matter. Some like Althusser hold that Marx rejects human nature and embraces historicism. Cornel West understands Marx to be a "radical historicist" who rejects ethical foundationalism.⁹⁶ Some like Geras argue that Marx had a robust notion of human nature that involves the productive dimensions of life. Lastly some like Sayers try to split the difference by providing a notion of historicized human nature that can fit the theoretical roles normally taken by an essentialist notion. I hold that on the issue of human nature, Marx tries to have his cake and eat it too and is both an essentialist and a historicist by sublating the distinction between them. As Ernst Bloch argued in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* and *The Principle of Hope*,⁹⁷ Marx's main ontological distinction from Aristotle is that for Marx, essence emerges through the dynamic motion of material reality instead of existing in potentiality at genesis.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI section 5

⁹⁶ West, Chapter 6 "Marx's Adoption of Radical Historicism"

⁹⁷ Bloch 1986 pages 234-241, Bloch 2019 page 39

⁹⁸ Marx's notion of essence in some ways is similar to the notion given in Hegel's *Logic*, where essence is not reducible to any of its appearances in history but is only discernable in and through the movement of these appearances (II.244-245). As Engels explains in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, the significance of Hegel's dialectic is in grasping the conceptual unity underpinning diverse appearances.

Consequently, for Marx human nature is something which emerges in and through history and thus can only be discerned by understanding its historical development.

For Aristotle, human nature is a fixed essence which defines its activity and purpose. This essentialist ontology has grounded much of virtue theory, from Aristotle to Nussbaum. There are various disadvantages of an essentialist theory of human nature. First, essentialist models tend to reify current conditions, as they take the essence of a thing to be whatever is true of most individuals at a given moment of time. Second, essentialist models can justify the trampling of individual autonomy and self-realization, as with the oppression of sexual deviancy. Third, essentialist ontology is not consistent with the diversity and dynamism of kinds revealed by modern anthropology and evolutionary biology. Nussbaum outlines an essentialism that aims to avoid these problems, as the alternative to essentialism leads to subjective relativism in ethics. She accounts for human nature in terms of capabilities: “The Aristotelian's fundamental commitment, by contrast, is to bring each and every person across the threshold into capability for good functioning” (Nussbaum, 231). She sees Marx’s general approach to human nature as akin to her own capabilities approach. Geras defends the role of human nature in Marx, arguing that universal ideas of human nature play a fundamental role in Marx’s theory. This essence is revealed in universal human needs such as hunger which we all experience socially. Much of Geras’s analysis rests on the sixth thesis on Feuerbach which defines human nature as an “ensemble of social relations”. This is presented against Feuerbach’s notion of an abstract essence inherent in every individual. Sayers argues against Geras and Nussbaum by arguing that their notion of human nature is too abstract and minimalist to be valuable to theory or ethics:

... the historicist approach, properly understood, does not deny that there are universal human characteristics of the sort that Nussbaum describes and indeed it would be a mistake to do so. The historicist criticism is, rather, that the essentialist account of human nature, so far from providing a determinate basis for values as it claims to be able to do, is too abstract and general to fulfill that role (Sayers, 159).

What Nussbaum, Geras and Sayers all get right is that Marx is against a notion of essence rooted in idealistic metaphysics or that is otherwise grounded on ahistorical, axiomatic principles. Marx's notion instead defines human nature through social history. This is a notion of human essence, but it is a rather unusual one. Humans are essentially animals which work socially in a universal way, but the ways we socialize and the purposes we pursue socially are intrinsically dynamic. Consequently, Marx's philosophical anthropology calls for attentive historical and empirical social science to develop an adequate understanding of human nature.

For Aristotle, we determine what is good for a thing's nature by determining its function, or *ergon* (ἔργον). The function is towards a *telos*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes the function of humanity as the cultivation of *eudaimonia*.⁹⁹ The function most adequate to *eudaimoneia* is contemplation, though virtuous practical activity is adequate to a lower degree. Aristotle also argues that the function of humanity is to be a member of a political community as human existence is impossible outside society.¹⁰⁰ Marx's theory of human nature inverts Aristotle's formulation by defining human nature not as a specific natural function but instead through the ability to develop functions socially. Human nature is characterized by the ability to create new functions around various human needs and incorporate them into a social totality. Marx

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b-1098b

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a

is effectively saying the *ἔργον* of humanity is the creation of *ἔργον*, or the human function is the creation of human functionality.¹⁰¹ The nature of human beings as species-being is to produce the *ergon* and the *telos* upon which ethics is based. As if to anticipate Marx, Aristotle describes the craftsman and their *ergon* in the following way:

What he has benefitted is his own handiwork; so he loves it more than the work loves its maker. The reason for this is that existence is to everyone an object of choice and love, and we exist through activity (because we exist by living and acting); and the maker of the work exists, in a sense, through his activity. *Therefore the maker loves his work, because he loves his existence. This is a natural principle; for the work reveals in actuality what is only potentially.* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a)

Here, Aristotle is using the craftsman as an analogy to explain beneficence, and why doing good for others is more pleasurable than receiving good. Both a benefactor and a craftsman realize themselves in their world actively. For the craftsmen, work takes an existential importance as the worker actualizes themselves and comes into being through their work. In a sense, Marx promotes the *ἔργον* that Aristotle attributes to the second nature of craftspeople to the status Aristotle gives to the general human *ἔργον* of contemplation. Aristotle is merely privileging and reifying that *ἔργον* which was most apparent to him as a member of the slave-owning intellectual aristocracy of ancient Greece. Marx's notion of *ἔργον* instead democratizes human nature by not presupposing the privilege of an elite social class.

This is all built into Marx's conception of species-being. Humanity as species-being is a totality of the various tasks and functions available to individuals within society. When humans are alienated from species-being, these tasks appear as the

¹⁰¹ One might question whether Marx shares Aristotle's functionalist methodology in ascertaining a thing's nature, but he does utilize such a method in *Capital* to describe the natures of capital, the proletariat, etc

impositions of necessity, but under emancipated social conditions the social significance of each individual task is transparent to the worker. Each individual *ergon* is situated within a broader framework of functions which gives it value, and when species-being is transparent to all subjects then not only do their own lives become meaningful, but so do the lives of others. The farmer is no longer alienated from those who benefit from her labor and can take enjoyment in how the sustenance of others realizes her own being. Conversely, the farmer understands the significance of the labor of others for her own wellbeing. Every subject's individual needs and capabilities are taken up as social needs by the emancipated society, and every individual takes up the needs of others as human needs. A productive and ethical socialist society by nature finely balances the needs and capabilities of every individual, not by immediately meeting all needs but by considering each need and capability in its social context in relation to all other needs and capabilities. New needs and capacities are only created insofar as they are harmonious with the various other needs and capacities. Conversely, an alienated society perverts our relationship to the needs and capabilities. Human needs are increasingly taken up either as an obstacle for the needs of others or as something which can be leveraged as a means to dominate. Capabilities on the other hand are treated instrumentally as things which must be purchased on the market to be valuable.

By identifying species-being as he does, Marx has defined human nature in terms of second nature. This means that there is a human essence for Marx, but it is not located either in a transcendent or theoretical realm nor in organic nature. It is instead found in the unique way in which human society takes up and develops the ends and capacities gifted to it by natural history, and in the existing social order. Sayers is correct

to say that such an essence is too abstract to inform specific normative claims on its own, however the abstraction is not entirely without normative or theoretical value. Though it cannot give us a specific picture of the good life, it can give us general principles of what the good life consists of. For instance, when Marx says that “love can only be exchanged for love, trust for trust (139)” he is making a normatively significant claim. However, a general principle like this is vague to be a functional norm on its own. As it is, it is merely an empty platitude which would go best in a self-help book.

Marx’s historicized notion of human essence can situate a notion of flourishing within different historical contexts and within different classes. As we saw, Marx points out how neolithic humans can feel at home in caves and simple dwellings. This is because the nature of neolithic people is framed within the horizons of a limited productive capacity. They are not a part of a society whose nature has realized the capacity for spacious, sanitary and comfortable living, and have not developed that need. Modern proletarians have that need in virtue of being within a society that has developed decent and sanitary housing, however economic inequality inhibits that end. Thus, Marx’s view does not entail wrongly viewing people with lower technological capacity as uniformly suffering due to their living conditions the way modern proletarians are. This is not to say that neolithic life is without its challenges, and Marx is no primitivist. There are basic human needs which are constantly in jeopardy in a neolithic society as nature dominates humanity. Vulnerability to natural crises impedes their wellbeing far more than for modern man. However, we cannot conclude from this that these societies were incapable of realizing human flourishing within their own context.

The exact outlines of this notion of human nature are unclear as Marx never fully fleshed out this theory of human nature and how it relates to history. Consequently, it is unclear how Marx fully reconciles essentialism and historicism.¹⁰² However, the outline broadly given here is the most consistent with his own words and captures what he thinks both the essentialist and historicist readings get right. Moreover, this notion of human nature captures both his theories of alienation and emancipation as well as what unites them together. The “ensemble of social relations” in a class society includes the fundamental antagonisms of class conflict, and under such circumstances human nature comes to be at war with itself. Emancipation, conversely, means humanity coming to terms with its universal nature through the experience of alienation and revolting against the self-imposed conditions which inhibit its flourishing.

Marx’s notion of social phronesis

An important implicit difference between Marx and Aristotle is in how they understand practical wisdom. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is the capacity which allows the virtuous individual to consistently do right by others and oneself. Marx’s notion of species-being implies an alternative path to wisdom in an emancipated society through a more enlightened form of the division of labor. In species-being, every individual masters virtues relative to their own capacities and contributes them to a social totality, and in turn gains the benefit of the virtues held by all others in society. When we are no

¹⁰² Adam Schaff gives a useful characterization of this: “Human labor *transforms* the objective reality and thereby turns it into *human* reality, that is, a result of human labor. And in transforming the objective reality-nature and society-man transforms the conditions of his own existence, and consequently himself, too, as a species. In this way, the human process of *creation* is, from man’s point of view, a process of *self-creation*. It was in this way-through labor-that *Homo sapiens* was born, and it is through labor that he continues to change and transform himself” (Schaff, 79)

longer alienated from species-being, every individual identifies with the whole, and the whole in turn pursues the enrichment and edification of every individual. Consequently, every individual is placed within a social totality, and provides their own knowledge and virtue to society. They do not need to master every virtue to live a virtuous life, as they have solidaristic relations with those who have developed other virtues. The brave soldier and the compassionate nurse both master distinct virtues and understand the relevance of the other in the greater social totality. Consequently, each individual knows what is right within the confines of the labor which they have mastered and does not need to master every virtue to live a flourishing life. Marx also grants a higher degree of value to all other forms of labor as all forms of socially valuable and individually edifying labor have their share in virtue and its cultivation. Even though alienated labor inhibits the development of many virtues, it sustains the development of others such as solidarity. This gives Marx's notion of character development an egalitarian quality which Aristotle's system intrinsically resists.

Marx's notion of practical wisdom and its egalitarian development rests on the improved technical means of production. We can now save enough labor time to meet everyone's needs while still allowing time for education, socialization and edification. This means workers have the ability to participate in planning and decision making in a way which feudal peasants or ancient slaves lacked, at least if we can provide sensible limits to labor time. As productive capacities continue to improve, society can grant still more time to cultural and intellectual development. This allows people to master a more diverse array of virtues and human capacities than under a system of alienated labor. However, for Marx this does not mean one becomes a *phronimos* in the terms Aristotle

laid out, as one only masters those skills which suit their talents and interests, so long as these skills give our lives social meaning (so, presumably this would exclude the skill of concocting biological weapons). Consequently, the division of labor is humanized through the elimination of coercion. As Marx famously stated in *The German Ideology*:

For 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 a 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, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (Marx, 53)

Notably, Marx is arguing here against an alienated imposition of the division of labor as an involuntary one. In an emancipated society, the person who plays violin is not simply a violinist but could also master other skills. There will still be preferences stemming from our specific desires and experiences that structure us as individuals.

The necessary feature of collective wisdom is solidarity, as every individual must see the wellbeing of every other individual as the *telos* of their own action and must understand their own wellbeing as incorporated into the *telos* of the whole. This fosters a kind of identity between the individual and the social we saw in the notion of species-being. What all these dimensions share is the absence of socially reified forms of alienation. The workers are no longer alienated from their species-being, one another, the productive process, or the *telos* of their collective activity, but are instead united together in a common purpose which all understand and embrace fully, albeit from their own perspectives. Modern society already contains the seeds of this in institutions like

the factory or the university, but these institutions are set up not to realize the flourishing of the various individuals which constitute it but instead the pursuit of alien ends – in the case of the factory, the flourishing of the investor’s bank account, or in the case of the modern university, a flourishing labor market. Factory workers, janitorial staff, adjunct professors, and so on are all intrinsic parts of the functioning of these institutions, but the function of these institutions is not the betterment of the factory workers, janitorial staff, adjunct professors and so on.

Conclusion

Marx’s moral distinction between emancipation and alienation, which is grounded in his concept of species-being, does provide a clear distinction between a flourishing humanity and an estranged or degraded humanity. Marx’s framework does clearly recall Aristotle’s ethical methods and conclusions in spite of their differences. Marx does think that moral polemics are fundamentally ideological and impotent, but that does not mean he doesn’t have a robust notion of flourishing with his theory of emancipation. Moral polemics put the cart before the horse, by granting causal power to moral beliefs instead of understanding that moral problems are solved through modifying material and social conditions. For instance, Marx is clear in his manuscripts that the moral problems of capitalism are caused by the institutions of private property and money, not bad ideas on the part of the capitalists. It is these material and social conditions, as well as their historical development, which must be the focus of analysis so that individuals can free themselves of their practical and theoretical chains, thereby emancipating themselves. That is not a rejection of the idea that socialism or communism would provide a normatively superior relationship between individuals,

society and nature. We will return to this theme in *Capital* to look at how even in his late work, Marx continues to juxtapose the humanistic benefits of an emancipated society versus the immiseration, economic despotism, alienation, and individual degradation brought about by capital.

Chapter 3: The Ontology of Capital, the Commodity Fetish, and its Humanist Themes

Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things. (Marx, 165-166)

I meant no harm. I most truly did not.
But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.
I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.
I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads
of the Thneeds I shipped out. I was shipping them forth
to the South! To the East! To the West! To the North!
I went right on biggering ... selling more Thneeds
And I biggered my money, which everyone needs.
- Dr Seuss, *The Lorax*

In the two decades between *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, Marx enriched his philosophical anthropology with social science and empirical analysis to produce a new method of historical analysis. His philosophical anthropology, as we saw, understands human nature as socially and historically constituted through labor. If human nature is socially and historically constituted, then the human condition is best understood by a materialist theory which reveals the course of social development. To formulate this theory, Marx had to incorporate the kind of empirical analysis Engels did in his *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. Alienation wasn't simply expressed in the experience of the individual but is also a material relation that can be seen empirically in social and economic statistics, epidemiology, sanitary standards, and

other sociological, anthropological and economic phenomena. This leads Marx to his theory of exploitation and his elaboration on its social consequences, where capital exploits the commodified labor of others for the purpose of its own growth. This chapter will show how the later ontology of the commodity reproduces his earlier ontology of alienation found in the manuscripts, and how the essential characteristic of class within capitalism for Marx is the commodification of labor. Thus we cannot say with Althusser that Marx jettisons his earlier humanistic commitments in their entirety, so much as he updates and enriches them with empirical content that was lacking before. The proletarian class struggle is an expression of the problems which their commodification creates for the proletariat, as they are trying to wrest control over their own lives from the alien power of capital.

Althusser rightly recognized that Marx's late work is robustly empirical and objective in a way in which his early work isn't. However, this is additive and in no way represents a turn away from his original humanistic commitments. Marx the social scientist and empirical observer is also still a humanist concerned with how human nature is being twisted against itself by capital, and how human beings are subject to an alien power which reduces the good to extrinsic exchange value. It is this phenomenon which the proletariat ought to resist and see through, not only for their own liberation but also the emancipation of the survivors of historical classes like slaves and peasants, and even the bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie and remaining aristocracy. What Marx aimed to do in *Capital* is to develop in detail the social and historical mechanisms underpinning what he described in a more Hegelian nomenclature in his early works.

Section 1 of this chapter will review the dialectical method of Marx in *Capital*. Section 2 will show how Marx's critique of exploitation follows from his ontology of the commodity and of capital. Section 2.1 will deal with the commodity fetish itself, 2.2 with capital and surplus value, and 2.3 with the relationship between Marx and Aristotle's critique of chrematistics. Section 3 will move on to Marx's ontology of human nature. Section 3.1 will show that *Capital* shares with the Manuscripts a conception of human nature which centers on the activity of labor. Section 3.2 will show the same, but with the notion of laboring humans as a social animal. Finally, section 4 will discuss the ontology of class and how the divisions over alienation are expressed as objective class relations, and not simply as a subjective identity.

The dialectical method of *Capital*

As the political project of emancipation required a theoretical understanding of the actual capitalist system in practice, Marx had to go beyond the speculative philosophical anthropology of German idealism and study human nature in relation to empirical anthropology, economics, and history. Marx's philosophical anthropology, or his ontology of human nature, understands humanity as historically situated within specific economic systems, material conditions and class relations. This approach served Marx to sort out a coherent general theory of human nature in relation to the activity of work as well as an abstract theory of alienation, development and emancipation. Marx's understanding of the relationship between his philosophical anthropology and empirical social science can be seen in a footnote in *Capital* on Bentham. In response to Bentham's idea that the principle of utility is a universal and common-sense framework for relating human nature to ethics, Marx argues that the general theory of human

nature must be adequate for interpreting human nature across its historical development:

To know what is useful for a dog, one must investigate the nature of dogs. This nature is not itself deducible from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations, etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch. (758)

Marx thinks that the general philosophical anthropology must be situated within a historical context instead of universalizing any one moment of human development. To do empirical analysis on humanity at any moment in history we must understand how that moment fits into a process of historical development. Instead of doing this, Bentham's concept of human nature is uncritically extrapolated from the bourgeois individual of his own society. This quote suggests Althusser's rejection of Marx's philosophical anthropology is half-right. Marx does not think there is a simple essence which can be derived without regard to history, but he does think there is a "human nature in general" which is "modified in each epoch".

Marx addresses his method in a lengthy quote from the Russian economist Kaufman, who described Marx's method in his review of *Capital*.¹⁰³ Marx cites this review positively and states that Kaufman's interpretation is broadly correct. Kaufman describes Marx as operating from the idea that any particular social formation is historically contingent, but this contingency itself is dependent on developments from earlier historical conditions. The development of these contingent relationships is studied to reveal the historical laws underpinning their motion. The method therefore

¹⁰³ Marx, 100-102

starts with the empirical; “... it is not the idea but only its external manifestation which can serve as the starting-point” (Marx, 101). By abstracting from the empirical, Marx determines the conditions of possibility behind their development, but unlike the thinking of other economists these abstractions are always situated within their historical context. There are some abstractions which do apply to all historical periods, such as the fact that labor mediates between the subject and the object, but most of those described by economists are relative to a particular epoch. Kaufman compares this to Darwin’s theory of evolution – where evolution describes the emergence of species with new laws of development, needs, capacities etc., Marx describes the creation, preservation and destruction of economic systems.¹⁰⁴

The ontology of the commodity in *Capital*

To properly understand the ethical dimensions of Marx’s *Capital*, it is first necessary to understand the general social ontology of capitalism that Marx provides. The general theory of alienation found in the *1844 manuscripts* finds a new theoretical basis in Marx’s concepts of commodification and exploitation. Workers aren’t just alienated, they become commodities for sale in the marketplace. As commodities, their value is reduced to their ability to be instrumentalized by capitalists and this value in

¹⁰⁴ As Marx states, this is a form of the dialectical method, but it is the “opposite” of Hegel’s method. This is not a total rejection of Hegel, and Marx ridicules both those who once embraced the mysticism of Hegel’s thinking when Marx was young, and those who rejected Hegel in his entirety at the time of writing: “The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Marx, 103). What Marx embraces about Hegel’s dialectic is its motion and dynamism, and the way it connects the emergence of a new system with the decay of an earlier system. The extent and nature of Marx’s disagreement with Hegel is itself a rich topic of debate, but the main thing for Marx is that the point of departure for philosophical dialectic ought to be material conditions. The upshot is that any sufficiently accurate description of capitalism, its operations and ontology, and the classes that form within it offer clues as to what a future possible society might look like instead.

turn determines the extent to which they can realize their basic human needs. Moreover, the process of commodification turns labor, which Marx takes to be the essential dimension of human fulfillment, into a burden. The ethical concerns of the proletariat stem first and foremost from their commodification, and it is the social mechanism that causes the abuses that Marx decries in *Capital*.

The two theories of value and the commodity fetish

Marx takes the commodity to be the concept through which one could begin to understand capitalism in its totality. This is because the emergence of the commodity is a condition for the possibility of capital (in both an ontological sense and a historical sense). The commodity is defined as any object whose value is its ability to be exchanged for another object while also being intrinsically valuable due to its particular use value. This leads the commodity to have a dual nature – on one hand, it is the thing itself with its particular properties (some of which are useful to us), and on the other hand, it is defined by its ability to be exchanged for a certain value of other objects on the marketplace. This dual nature adds a curiously complex nature to Marx's materialism, as the material object itself is combined with a mysterious, immaterial nature that cannot be found in the object itself. This second dimension is only possible because of the way the object interacts with others in the marketplace. The mysterious double-nature of the commodity is Marx's concept of the commodity fetish.

Use value, broadly speaking, is the value that an object has as something which is useful on its own terms and has been a part of social reality since the emergence of society itself, and so can be taken to be as close to a universal concept of value as any.

Despite the universal character of use value in general, specific use values are as varied as the needs they meet and the objects which meet those needs;

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter. It is therefore the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond, which is the use-value or useful thing. (Marx, 126)

As use value is distinct to each particular use and depends on the properties of the object, use value is qualitative in nature instead of quantitative. Exchange value, unlike use value, does not come from the use of the object but instead its exchange for another object. To have exchange value, an object must be taken to market – or to put it in other words, the object must become a commodity. Exchange value is quantitative instead of qualitative as it is defined in terms of a sum of money.¹⁰⁵ In theory, all exchange values can be tied to a use value somewhere down the line as its purpose is to obtain useful objects. However, with the development of capitalism, use value increasingly moves into the background as the basis of the economy becomes increasingly centered around the accumulation of wealth in terms of monetary value.

The ultimate determinant of value as a quantifiable metric (and therefore as exchange value) is socially necessary human labor. This labor is abstract labor, meaning it has been abstracted from all particular types of labor (for instance, tailoring, weaving, etc) into a general category as such an abstraction is necessary to make different kinds of labor commensurate on the market.¹⁰⁶ If more of a commodity can be produced with

¹⁰⁵ Importantly, Marx differentiates between exchange value, which is the real monetary value which the commodity should find on the market, and price which is the actual value it ends up being sold for in Chapter 3

¹⁰⁶ Moore (“Marx and the Origins of Dialectical Materialism”) criticizes Marx’s concept of abstract labor by arguing that this commits Marx to a kind of idealist Platonic form, but Pike

less socially necessary labor, the exchange value per unit will go down, while the exchange value goes up if the socially necessary labor time goes up. As labor has different value on the market thanks to the greater demand for unique skills, Marx also accounts for differences in skill by incorporating the value of education:

In order to modify the general nature of the human organism in such a way that it acquires skill and dexterity in a given branch of industry, and becomes labour-power of a developed and specific kind, a special education or training is needed, and this in turn costs an equivalent in commodities of a greater or lesser amount. (Marx, 275-276)

This concept of value is Marx's labor theory of value, which is itself based on the labor theories of value found in Smith and Ricardo.¹⁰⁷ The labor theory of value in turn provides the foundation for his theory of exploitation, as exploitation emerges from the difference between the value of work as a commodity and the value of the commodity produced.

The crowning achievement in Marx's ontology of the commodity is his notion of the commodity fetish, which addresses the metaphysical problem of how, exactly, the commodity comes to contain exchange value in addition to use value.¹⁰⁸ After all, as an object there is no objective and measurable part of it which contains "exchange value". The exchange value does necessitate real use value based on the objective properties of the object (or at least, the perception of real use value), but those objective properties themselves tell us nothing about the quantity of that exchange value. Yet the essence of the object as a commodity is exchange value, instead of its real material qualities (and

correctly points out that this abstraction isn't simply some theoretical construct but is actually a part of the real material process of exchange, and therefore isn't ahistorical and transcendent even if it is an abstraction (Pike, 84-86)

¹⁰⁷ Marx's response to the labor theories of value in Ricardo and Smith are found in footnote 33 (Marx, 173-174)

¹⁰⁸ Marx, 131

its use).¹⁰⁹ So where is this exchange value located objectively? Marx aims to answer this question through the commodity fetish:

A commodity appears at first sign an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So as far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless, the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will (Marx, 163-164).

The commodity is an object whose nature has an ontological character that extends beyond its objective material basis. Their worth as a commodity cannot be found in the material object in immediate experience, but only in relation to other things on the market. As commodities gain this ontological character through material social relations, this does not violate Marx's materialist ontology. On the contrary, it reveals the way ideas depend on material nature to be instantiated. Yet Marx's account here does reveal a level of metaphysical complexity to his materialism that goes well beyond simple mechanistic thinking. The complexity of the commodity is possible due to Marx's

¹⁰⁹ "If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange values.

...

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in the direct relation between the thing and man, while, inversely, its value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process." (Marx, 176-177)

conception of reification, which is his understanding of how society creates categories whose properties cannot be found in nature, and in turn hypostatize those properties such that they are treated as the eternal qualities of the thing.

The commodity is reification *par excellence*. Reification grants commodities its twofold fetishistic nature as a sensuous material object and its possibility to become all other things:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. (Marx, 165)

The two natures of the commodity – its externalized essence as exchange value, and its non-essential sensuous nature – become increasingly disconnected. Lukács correctly recognized the echoes of Hegel's theory of alienation in Marx's thinking, even though the 1844 Paris Manuscripts were still unpublished when he described it:

What is of central importance here is that because of this situation a man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. (Lukács, 87)

The commodity fetish is alienated human labor, and it is the alienated human labor which gives it its value. The commodity is alienated insofar as it was at first the worker's creation (and therefore immediately non-alien), but then gained independence from the worker and confronted them as an absolute other which determines the social value of their life. Here we see how reification and alienation capture different aspects of the same process.

The properties which make a commodity a commodity instead of merely a product of human labor are not empirical or sensuous, but instead a consequence of how humans relate socially to what they produce. This is why Marx uses the term “fetishism”. Religious fetishes or idols are produced by human hands but are nonetheless interpreted as also divine:

It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (Marx, 165)

The commodity contains all other commodities on the market within itself as a possibility. A sufficient quantity of money can be exchanged for any other commodity on the market, and conversely the realization of any commodity is a quantity of money. Sale and purchase is the realization of latent possibility within every commodity, and if the commodity did not contain this possibility it would no longer be a commodity. It is possible for commodities to gain this property because the commodity comes to embody the social relationship of exchange itself. Yet social relationships are ostensibly between subjects, not objects. If we ignore the process of exchange, we see that individuals are merely working on their environment and then fulfilling one another’s needs socially. If we consider the process of exchange, however, the object comes to mediate between these social relations. This alters the character of the social relation such that it is now between the objects people bring to market, not the people themselves:

Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labour, the specific social characteristics of their private labours appear only within this exchange. In other words, the labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, *but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things*. [emphasis added] (Marx, 165-166)

In other words, the value of the commodity is not an individual subjective determination nor an intersubjective determination between two or more individuals but is instead determined by its relationship to all other commodities. This has significant normative implications insofar as human beings are subjecting themselves and others to an alien, objective force which eliminates their practical freedom. Lukács speaks to the subjective dimension of the alienation entailed by commodification:

Subjectively – where the market economy has been fully developed – a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article. (Lukács, 87)

This leads to further dehumanization when labor itself becomes such a commodity and its subjective content is consequently disregarded.¹¹⁰

Marx characterizes commodities not only as objects whose value is determined by the value they receive in exchange, but also as congealed labor.¹¹¹ This is because the commodity is in turn produced through the commodified labor of their fellows. Human labor has gone into carefully crafting the item from material resources, and upon

¹¹⁰ The normative issues surrounding the commodification of labor is a central concern for Marxist humanists such as Adam Schaff (Schaff, 122-126) and Erich Fromm (64-65)

¹¹¹ Marx, 130

completion that labor congeals into a commodity embodied in its distinct material form. The commodity fetish comes to impinge on human existence itself when labor becomes commodified. Once humans are forced to sell themselves on the labor market, they also gain a twofold nature. On one hand, they are a living, breathing person with particular needs and capacities, but on the other hand they must also bring *themselves* to market and sell their time. They must isolate and develop those parts of themselves which are valued on the market and ignore those parts which are not and market themselves as a useful resource for others to use. This has a significant impact on how capitalism impacts the development of working individuals. Not only does commodification lead to the dehumanizing alienation described in chapter 2, but it also leads to exploitation and its attendant evils such as poor working conditions, long working days and wage slavery.

Lukács speaks to the ethical ramifications of the universalization of the exchange relation in his *History and Class Consciousness*.¹¹² Individuals come to understand themselves and others through the commodity relation as this is the basis of their daily practices and their general way of life. People as commodities come to understand their needs and capacities and those of others not in qualitative and human terms, but instead in the terms of exchange value. Their personality and their concerns come to be shaped by this relation. Lukács uses the example of a journalist, who sells themselves as an “impartial” observer. To be valued as “impartial” by employers, they must habituate themselves to the bourgeois perspective. This process entails the subsumption of the individual into the values of bourgeois society:

It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can

¹¹² Lukaács, 99

‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic ‘qualities’ into play without their being subject increasingly to this reifying process. (Lukács, 100)

For Marx, Lukács sees, bourgeois values not only alienate people from things but from their individual humanity and from that of others. It reduces, as Marx says, social relations into a relation of things. This in turn reduces the human being to a mere commodity and increasingly converts their relationship to other people into commodity relations. This is not a virtuous but a vicious reduction as it suppresses those parts of life which cannot be realized in terms of exchange value.

Capital, surplus value and exploitation

With the advent of money,¹¹³ Marx’s analysis moves from the barter of commodities to a cycle between commodities and money, or C-M-C as individuals sell one commodity to buy another.¹¹⁴ The C-M-C cycle implies the existence of its mirror, the M-C-M cycle, as individuals also buy commodities for the sake of sale.¹¹⁵ This cycle takes a life of its own when the commodity is sold for more money than what it was

¹¹³ With an increasingly complex society which produces ever more complicated needs, a greater variety of commodities are needed up until the point where a universal commodity is required to simplify the process of exchange. This universal commodity, or money, could take the form of any common medium of exchange (Marx, 183), and early on could be found in the form of livestock. The object best suited to function as the universal commodity is one whose qualitative and quantitative value is easily determined objectively, which privileged metals whose value could be determined by measuring the purity and weight (Marx, 184). The need was best met by a metal which was both relatively inert (such that it does not lose value through rust or corrosion) and also rare (such that it is difficult for one to simply go out and create large sums of money by mining, thereby causing inflation). Consequently, cultures generally moved from more common and chemically reactive elements like copper and iron to more rare and inert elements like silver and gold. A currency backed in gold contains a certain value of gold per coin, and gold as a substance is inert and objectively quantifiable in terms of weight. All commodities can thus be granted a value in terms of a quantity of gold for which they can be exchanged, as all commodities are commensurable in the process of exchange.

¹¹⁴ Marx, 200

¹¹⁵ Marx, 248

purchased for, as with merchants who buy cheaply in one port and sell dearer in another. This becomes the M-C-M' cycle, where delta-M is surplus value.¹¹⁶ With surplus value, we get the emergence of a new kind of object called capital. Capital is, broadly, a collection of assets which seeks to grow over time through this cycle of sale and purchase, or to put it in other words, it seeks its own growth through the circulation of commodities. Marx raises a fundamental problem with this new institution, which is that profit cannot possibly come from the activity of circulation.¹¹⁷ If all buyers of commodities sell more dearly than they buy, then once one individual makes a profit that profit ends up in the hands of the next seller, meaning there is no real accumulation.¹¹⁸ If merchants make profit by buying more cheaply, the same problem occurs in reverse.¹¹⁹ The only remaining option is that it is the clever merchants who make a profit at the expense of the bad merchants, but this is unsustainable too. An individual capitalist might profit, but as a whole their entire class gains nothing.¹²⁰ Thus, the act of circulation alone cannot explain profit on a social scale. What is necessary to have profit is a commodity which can systematically be purchased over again for less

¹¹⁶ Marx, 251

¹¹⁷ This is described in detail in Chapter 5, "Contradictions in the General Formula"

¹¹⁸ "Suppose then that some inexplicable privilege allows the seller to sell his commodities above their value, to sell what is worth 100 for 110, therefore with a nominal price increase of 10% ... But after he has sold, he becomes a buyer. A third owner of commodities comes to him as a seller, and he too, for his part, enjoys the privilege of selling his commodities 10 percent too dear. *Our friend gained 10 as a seller only to lose it again as a buyer*" (263) (emphasis added)

¹¹⁹ "Let us make the opposite assumption, that the buyer has the privilege of purchasing commodities below their value. In this case we do not even need to recall that he in his turn will become a seller. He was a seller before he became a buyer; he had already lost 10 percent as a seller before he gained 10 percent as a buyer. Everything remains as it was before." (263)

¹²⁰ "A may be clever enough to get the advantage of B and C without their being able to take their revenge. A sells wine worth £40 to B, and obtains from him in exchange £50. A has converted his £40 into £50, has made more money out of less, and has transformed his commodities into capital. Let us examine this a little more closely. Before the exchange we have £40 of wine in the hands of A and £50 worth of corn in those of B, a total value of £90. After the exchange we still have the same total value of £90, The value in circulation has not increased one iota; all that has changed is the distribution between A and B." (265)

than it is worth. The only commodity which fits the bill is commodified labor, so capital demands that individuals commodify themselves on the market to sustain its existence.¹²¹ This is possible because, unlike other commodities, labor is the creator of value itself.

The excess value produced above the pay of the employee is the surplus value which is the root of all profit. The accumulation of capital through the systematic purchase of commodified labor for less than that labor produces is the foundation of Marx's theory of exploitation. Marx ultimately thinks it is most helpful to understand surplus value in terms of time. There is some period of time in which the worker works and is paid the full value of his labor so that he can live, but in exchange he must also work some unpaid time. The value which the worker gets as an exploited worker is at minimum the normal cost of subsistence. This cost of labor is what Marx calls variable capital, as opposed to constant capital (investment in machinery, raw material, buildings, etc). Constant capital is purchased from other capitalists (though early in the history of capitalism it was looted from others) while variable capital is that portion of capital that pays wages. Surplus value, which is the source of profit, is what is left over.

Notably, Marx thinks the cost of subsistence which sets the theoretical floor of variable capital is not a hard minimum but varies depending on the standard of living in a particular society.¹²² For instance, in a society where the internet is necessary for

¹²¹ As Žižek argues, this is a process whereby the quantitative expansion of the commodity form leads to a qualitative change in the commodity, as commodity exchange is no longer simply an exchange of equivalents but has become a form of exploitation (Žižek, 137). This ties Marx's theory of commodification to the dialectical movement between quantity and quality which reappears throughout the work of Marx and Engels

¹²² Marx, 274-275

normal social existence, the cost of subsistence goes up. Alternatively, when the working class is more powerful and organized, they can raise up the level of subsistence and therefore also variable capital. However, these conditions are rare (especially in Marx's time) and what is more frequently the case is that employers are free to cut wages below the level of subsistence which naturally risks the health of the working class. The entelechy of capital is accumulation, meaning that its tendency is always to push wages as low as they can get away with.

The critique of chrematistics

The pursuit of money as an end brings Marx into conversation with Aristotle. An essential moment in *Capital* for anyone aiming to draw a link between Marx and Aristotle or for anyone looking into the ethical ramifications of Marx's account is his reference to the theory of chrematistics. Economics for Aristotle was more circumscribed than our concept of it today. In his time, economics referred to care for the household. The *oikos*, or household, should be ordered and productive, which requires effective management of the individuals within the household.¹²³ The development of individual virtue on the part of the head of household is a necessary condition for a well-ordered family, and this in turn helps develop the virtue of wives, children and slaves. Chrematistics is the science of making money from money. This is different from economics in that it aims for wealth that outstrips the real needs of the household and becomes an end in and of itself.

Marx references Aristotle's concept of chrematistics when he notes that the M-C-M' cycle in capitalism can be (and is) repeated ad infinitum. There is no logical limit to

¹²³ Aristotle, 2017, Book I Chapter 13

what M' can be aside the total wealth in a society, which is a value that is itself generally expanding. In fact, M' depends on the continued growth of the market in general.¹²⁴ Moreover, it motivates capitalists to continually exploit labor. Capital does not seek an end beyond its own expansion, but this expansion necessarily entails its own continued growth *ad infinitum*. Aristotle's critique of chrematistics is relevant for Marx in how it identifies the idea of growth of individual monetary wealth as an end in itself is socially toxic,¹²⁵ Marx valued production and the abundance it produced, but this production and abundance ought to be towards the ends of the good life instead of chrematistic ends. Since the continual demand for growth reaches the limits of what can be achieved without impeding on other goods, growth as an end inevitably leads to other goods or ends being sacrificed in favor of growth for its own sake. Inexorably, all things become commodities in the marketplace, meaning the entirety of human existence falls under the sway of an alien power. This might entail an individual sacrificing their virtuous character, for instance an honest man learning to lie to preserve his business. It might also entail sacrificing others for one's own ends, for instance by working them to death.

¹²⁴ This is something which environmentalists frequently critique about capitalism, as it motivates people to exceed ecological limits on economic growth within technical limits. Though Marx did have a general understanding of how industrial capitalism interrupted the metabolism between man and nature, he never considered the possibility that the overabundance he aspired towards might also have a similar effect. Some, like G.A. Cohen as we have seen, identify this as a reason to update Marx's philosophy for our own epoch.

¹²⁵ Marx gives the following quote from Aristotle: "Now chrematistics can be distinguished from economics in that 'for chrematistics, circulation is the source of riches ... it appears to revolve around money, for money is the beginning and the end of this kind of exchange. Therefore also riches, such as chrematistics strives for, are unlimited. Just as every art which is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, has no limit to its aims, because it seeks constantly to approach nearer and nearer to that end, while those arts which pursue means to an end are not boundless, since the goal itself imposes a limit on them, so with chrematistics there are no bounds to its aims, these aims being absolute wealth. Economics, unlike chrematistics, has a limit ... for the object of the former is something different from money, of the latter the augmentation of money ... by confusing these two forms, which overlap each other, some people have been led to look upon the preservation and increase of money *ad infinitum* as the final goal of economics'" (Marx, 253-254)

We saw this idea expressed in Marx's early manuscript on money when he describes how money turns virtues (and even vices) into commodities that can be bought and sold. The critique of chrematistics thus parallels Marx's own thinking, except for the fact that Aristotle never conceives of a mode of production grounded on chrematistic reason. For Aristotle the individual involved in chrematistics is merely a corrosive parasite on society, where under capitalism they are also the ruling class. What Aristotle and Marx both hold is that granting money the purpose of making more money leads to the subsumption of all other goods underneath it, such that economic growth becomes the primary purpose of productive activity, and all other goods depend on market exchange to be realized. Goods are no longer valued in terms of good that they achieve, but in terms of the rate that they can fetch on the market. Whatever is in demand becomes a good, regardless of whether it is socially harmful in the long term or has other negative externalities.

Notably, the chrematistic reason critiqued in *Capital* reproduces concepts from Marx's early writings in the manuscripts on alienation as well as money. The pursuit of exchange value alienates individuals from the real economy which centers around meeting needs and instead reduces the value to a universally commensurable metric. Consequently, capitalists come to view workers as an investment upon which they must make a return to justify that investment. The value of the individual is reduced to what they can do for others who can pay. This fits Marx's description of alienation from other people, as the reality of the worker's life disappears in the eyes of the capitalist. This has two important consequences frequently noted by Marxists. First, any notion of the moral or physical needs of the worker become secondary or outright disappear as they

are not relevant to the capitalist. These are issues for the worker to take care of, and in the mind of the capitalist the worker ought to work if they want them solved. Second, any labor which is done for its own sake and not for pay disappears from the economy. For instance, domestic labor (disproportionately women's labor) is not considered "productive" labor as they are not paid for it. Whether employed or unemployed, the worker is not treated by the system as a real human being but merely an instrument towards realizing the ends of the capitalist. Consequently, human value is no longer determined by its own sake within the real needs of the *Oikos* but is instead projected onto capital and its entelechy of endless growth as an alien institution of human creation. This institution binds the fates of both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the trajectory of the market, which follows its own laws. Engels describes the connection between the reification of capital, alienation, and domination of the laws of the market in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

The more a social activity, a series of social processes, becomes too powerful for men's conscious control and grows above their heads, and the more it appears a matter of pure chance, then all the more surely within this chance the laws peculiar to it and inherent in it assert themselves as if by natural necessity. Such laws also govern the chances of commodity production and exchange. To the individuals producing or exchanging, they appear as alien, at first often unrecognized, powers, whose nature must first be laboriously investigated and established. These economic laws of commodity production are modified with the various stages of this form of production, but in general the whole period of civilization is dominated by them. And still to this day the product rules the producer; still to this day the total production of society is regulated, not by a jointly devised plan, but by blind laws which manifest themselves with the elemental violence in the final instance in the storms of the periodical trade crises. (Engels, 1972 213-214)

This suggests contra Althusser that there was no significant break between early Marx and late Marx, so much as an elaboration of his earlier theory of alienation. As we saw, Althusser thought of the late Marx as rejecting a robust conception of the human and its

needs upon which he might ground a humanistic morality of flourishing. Yet in the critiques of commodification and chrematistic reason, we see how Marx is concerned with how commodification reduces social relations between people to an alien and artificial value system that conceals the humanity of others. Now that we have seen how the commodity fetish updates Marx's theory of alienation, we must consider its relationship to human nature.

The social ontology of human nature in *Capital*

While Marx's theory of commodification preserves his theory of alienation, he also brings an updated version of his theory of human nature from the manuscripts into *Capital*. This is seen primarily in his treatment of labor and cooperation. His theory of labor updates his earlier notion that labor is purposeful activity which mediates between the object and subject to reconcile them with one another, and which in turn alters both subject and object. His theory of cooperation on the other hand enriches his notion of human beings as social animals. In both cases, Marx places both labor and cooperation as historical phenomena that change in ways which can be explored empirically. The empirical content not only tells the story of how these things change through history but clarify and provide content to his earlier abstractions. What we will see is that *Capital* therefore is a continuity and development of his earlier thinking, not a rejection of his earlier humanistic ethical ideals.

The theory of human nature and labor in *Capital*

In Chapter 7 of *Capital*, Marx reproduces much of the philosophical anthropology of his earlier work. Marx begins this chapter by abstracting from capitalism to the

relationship between humans and nature in general.¹²⁶ He echoes his earlier theory of labor as the unity between subject and object or humanity and nature. The worker's embodiment in the objects of labor is the next aspect Marx notes; "He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body ... in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs" (283). As with his concept of labor in his early manuscripts, productive activity alters the nature of the subject as well as the object; "Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (283). Marx proceeds to characterize this as the development of human freedom in relation to nature; "He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power" (283). Accordingly, human labor in *Capital* is still essential to the actualization of human nature and freedom, as well as the mutual genesis and interactive unity of the object and subject.

Marx returns to a disanalogy almost identical to the one made in the *1844 Manuscripts* to characterize human labor against the laborious activity of other creatures like spiders, beavers and bees.¹²⁷ Marx identifies the universal and free aspect of human labor with the capacity of workers in a society to design what they produce. This design is in turn an expression of human needs but is also an expression of

¹²⁶ "Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature" (Marx, 283).

¹²⁷ "A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally." (Marx, 284)

purposeful *will*.¹²⁸ Will unites intention and design with the material process and resources, but alienation interrupts this unity. Alienation is witnessed in the individual's lack of attraction to the kind of work they are doing, and a forced attention which is contrary to the individual's real enjoyment of their productive power. Conversely, emancipated labor is a "free play" of physical and mental powers.¹²⁹

Marx identifies the three fundamental elements of all labor outside of the worker; "(1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work" (Marx, 284). His analysis of elements (2) and (3) recalls important themes from his early manuscripts, like his idea of nature and the means of production as an extended human body:

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which he serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object. ... *Thus nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, which he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible.* (Marx, 285).
[emphasis added]

Through labor, the objects of the world are taken up by the worker as their own organs. Their embodiment expands as they master and utilize the things in their environment for their purposes, which in turn causes the nature of subjects to develop through history. The story of historical development begins at a stage where the world has not yet been substantively changed by human hands, nor have humans significantly

¹²⁸ "Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it. This subordination is no mere momentary act. Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work." (Marx, 284)

¹²⁹ "This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work and the way in which it has to be accomplished, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as the free play of his own physical and mental powers, the closer his attention is forced to be" (Marx, 284).

developed their own nature.¹³⁰ As humans develop tools and new ways of organizing production, their own nature is modified. Marx compares this notion to Benjamin Franklin's *homo faber*, or humans as animals which design, make and share tools, although he qualifies this by noting that toolmaking is "present in germ among certain species of animals" (Marx, 286). This leads Marx to argue that we can best understand human nature within a certain economy by looking at the means of production present in that society.¹³¹ This extends not only to the tools used by productive individuals but the world itself as labor shapes the world to reflect human nature.¹³² Once labor is complete, being emerges out of unrest, which is to say the process has crystallized into a static thing.¹³³ This thing contains within it the value of all the materials which went into its production and goes on to contribute its value to the production of new things. Hence products are both the consequences of labor (often generations of labor) and its conditions.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ As the earth is his original larder, so too it is his original tool house. It supplies him, for instance, with stones for throwing, grinding, pressing, cutting, etc. The earth itself is an instrument of labour ... As soon as the labour process has undergone the slightest development, it requires specially prepared instruments. Thus we find stone implements and weapons in the oldest caves. (Marx, 285-286)

¹³¹ (Marx, 286) In a footnote later in the chapter, Marx even extends the historical and economic contingency of human nature to the notions of skilled and unskilled labor. He argues that there is really no such thing as "unskilled" labor in an absolute sense, but merely that in all societies the development of some skills become so generalized that they come to be taken for granted and expected of the average individual. (Marx, 305 footnote 19)

¹³² In a wider sense we may include among the instruments of labour ... all the objective conditions necessary for conducting the labor process ... Once again, the earth itself is a universal instrument of this kind, for it provides the worker with the ground beneath his feet and a 'field of employment' for his own particular process. (Marx, 287)

¹³³ Marx, 287

¹³⁴ As an example, Marx appeals to domesticated animals which are not only produced by the breeder of the individual but by generations of breeders shaping the entire type. In this process, the products become means of production and thereby lose their appearance as objects which are produced. This is because their genesis by human hands is irrelevant, and its primary characteristic is its productive function. (Marx, 287-289)

This description so far is of labor in its general sense, or what characterizes labor universally across human history:

[Labor] is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather it is common to all forms of society in which human beings live. (Marx 290)

When Marx explores how this general formulation is manifested in specifically capitalist conditions, he describes processes that mirror two forms of alienation mentioned in his *1844 Manuscripts*. First, the worker is now alienated from the *process* of production, as they sell their labor power on the market:

First, the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs; the capitalist takes good care that the work is done in a proper manner, and the means of production are applied directly to the purpose, so that the raw material is not wasted, and the instruments of labour are spared, i.e. only worn to the extent necessitated by their use in the work. (Marx, 291).

Labor as the purposive activity of the working individual becomes alienated from the individual, because it is the capitalist who controls the process. Second, the product is the property of the capitalist, not the worker who produces it, meaning the worker has no say in the object's fate. Marx compares the worker here to the microbes fermenting wine in the capitalist's cellar;

By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living agent of fermentation, into the lifeless constituents of the product, which also belong to him. From his point of view, the labour process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased ... Thus the product of this process belongs to him just as much as the wine which is the product of the process of fermentation going on in his cellar. (Marx, 292)

In this second case, the object produced by the worker's will is absorbed into capital, and becomes the object of the capitalist's ends. Though he does not use the term alienation, Marx describes the same processes he highlighted in his earlier manuscripts

as both the object produced and the process of work itself become the objects of an alien rationality.

Chapter 7 of *Capital* serves as Marx's clearest reference to his early unpublished theory of human nature in his late work. We see how labor serves to unify subject and object, ends and means, mind and machine, idea and matter, design and product, and various other metaphysical dualities. As with the early Paris Manuscripts, labor shapes both subject and object, but the social mechanisms behind alienation turn this aspect of human nature against itself as it leads to the degeneration of the worker and the growth of an alien objectivity with hostile ends.

Cooperation

In cooperation, the effort of a group operating together as a totality is greater than the sum of their parts. Marx uses a simple military analogy to illustrate this:

Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of an infantry regiment, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workers differs from the social force that is developed when many hands co-operate in the same undivided operation, such as raising a heavy weight, turning a winch, or getting an obstacle out of the way. (Marx, 443)

Cooperation does not merely increase the productive power of the individual, but creates "a new productive power, which is intrinsically a collective one" (Marx, 443). Here we have an empowered collective subject which can achieve things no mere individual subject can achieve. Cooperation in all cases is the organizing of social individuals according to a rational plan; "When numerous workers work together side by side in accordance with a plan, whether in the same process, or in different but connected processes, this form of labour is called co-operation." (Marx, 443). The

collective productive subject is a consequence of the social character of human nature; “This originates from the fact that man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at all events a social animal” (Marx, 444). Cooperation therefore realizes the social nature of the human species and allows workers to transcend their individual limits. This recalls Marx’s idea of species-being as the individual human comes to understand their nature and development as a part of the social totality. By working socially under a plan alongside others the individual worker “strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species” (Marx 447).

Capital emerges first and foremost through the cooperation of workers. This cooperation begins in a merely quantitative character, as more and more workers who do the same task are brought under the same roof. This has benefits in economies of scale, for instance by fitting more workers in a single building. This eventually increases the rate of profit relative to capital invested before competition reduces the value of a particular commodity, which puts less efficient individual producers out of business. Under capitalism, cooperation only occurs once a capitalist has accumulated sufficient capital to employ others profitably. Consequently, cooperation appears in capitalism as the positive contribution of the bourgeoisie and not something which the workers can freely organize on their own:

Moreover, the co-operation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. Their unification into one single productive body, and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside their competence. These things are not their own act, but the act of the capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation. Hence the interconnection between their various labours confronts them, in the realm of ideas, as a plan drawn up by the capitalist, and in practice, as his authority, as the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose. (Marx 450)

This formulation recalls the concept of species-being and humanity's alienation from it found in the manuscripts. The social character of labor is a consequence of their human nature itself and it is this social labor that goes on to grow capital, but the social character appears to the workers themselves as the property of capital. It appears as the consequence of a despotic other, be it a capitalist, or in earlier times, kings and theocrats.¹³⁵ Some forms of cooperation even predate class society as a whole and can be found in the times of primitive communism.¹³⁶ What distinguishes capitalism is that cooperation becomes the universal tendency of all production, as every field of industry comes to benefit from the economies of scale brought about by cooperation and as every commodity enters the same universal market. The pyramids of the pharaoh depended on cooperation on a large scale, but those workers who cooperated on the pyramids were otherwise peasants who farmed individual plots during the farming season. The capitalist system, on the other hand, extends cooperation universally. Therefore, the system of capitalism which is premised on individual gain is ironically the condition for fully realizing the social character of human nature.

An important aspect of cooperation in capitalism is the development of the division of labor. Labor had been divided along specialized lines at least since the development of exchange. It was already a theme in Plato's *Republic* and other ancient texts.¹³⁷ The advantage of the division of labor in the ancient world was that specialization ensured greater productivity and social freedom from natural constraints.

¹³⁵ Marx, 452

¹³⁶ Marx, 452

¹³⁷ This is seen most notably in his theory of the three classes in *The Republic*, though the idea is fundamental to Plato's philosophy. Even the distinction between the sophist and the philosopher is a division of labor – where the sophist teaches rhetoric, the philosopher's object of labor is truth.

The specialized worker generally had to understand a host of different skills related to their specialty (for instance, the wagon maker must be able to make the wheel and the axle). This meant that the worker had to understand how to make many different parts, the significance of these parts for the whole, and finally how all these parts are arranged together. Consequently, there was nothing particularly dehumanizing or limiting about the division of labor – on the contrary, in many respects it created new horizons of human freedom and development.

The character of the division of labor changes under capitalism for two reasons. First, there is the aforementioned fact that the worker is now a commodity, meaning that the worker now needs to sell their labor to be directed by the rationality of another. Second, there is the development of increasingly complicated rational plans of production which are most efficient for the purposes of the capitalist when individuals focus all their attention on a single part of the task. Marx tells the story of this development through handicraft to manufacture and finally to industrial mechanization and automation. At each step along the way, capitalists in different industries identify new ways to simplify production and divide up the work process into ever-more specialized tasks, or even find some tasks which can be done by machines operated by a smaller number of employees. This process has continued after Marx's death through new social forces like Taylor's model of labor management and contemporary automation.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* describes the rise to domination of Taylorist work models between the early and late 20th century, as well as their influence on later workplace organization models. For Braverman, the advantage of Taylorism for the manager is the ability to mechanically and precisely organize work to optimize not only productivity but the motivation of the employee in spite of their alienating and exploitative working conditions.

The division of labor under capitalism has important consequences for the lives of the workers. First, work becomes less interesting and engaging simply due to its increasingly repetitive and one-dimensional character, which means work becomes less and less a means of self-realization. Second, the workers themselves come to be treated as machines by their employers and managers as their function in the work process is increasingly reduced to predictable, mechanistic actions. Finally, workers as commodities themselves are devalued, diminishing their ability to bargain over their living conditions. If human beings need a fulfilling work life to achieve human flourishing, then the division of labor will reach a point where it becomes contrary to human flourishing. The division of labor is not made with the ends of the workers in mind but instead towards private economic interests. An individual with narrow talents might be well suited to a world characterized by a rigid division of labor, but this only assumes that the market demands those talents. Even assuming there are many individuals with narrow talents and interests, there are other individuals with much richer needs and talents. Consigning individuals to narrow specialties only denies the richness of their talents for themselves and others. Marx's point is not that the division of labor is in itself harmful, but that labor must be divided according to the ends of the proletariat themselves and not their employers.

Class and class struggle

To fully understand the theory of alienation and human nature in *Capital*, we must understand how Marx conceives of class within capitalism. Yet Marx himself died before he could finish the section of *Capital* defining class broadly and the working class

more specifically.¹³⁹ Luckily, he left enough to reconstruct his notion of class. First, Marx did leave us with a negative definition when he argues that revenue source seems at first sight to be a good answer, but quickly dismisses it. This would lead to absurd conclusions like doctors and bureaucrats being a different class.¹⁴⁰ It would simply make the concept of class too fine-grained to grasp the whole, and to conceal the fundamental power dynamics underpinning capitalism. To Marx's negative definition we can add that quantity of revenue is not a good distinction either. Quantity of revenue is an intuitive demarcation, yet any distinction based on revenue needs to determine an arbitrary income where making one dollar a year more would catapult one from the class of workers into some higher tier.

Ultimately, the notion of class running through *Capital* hinges on the relationships which individuals have to the means of production. This is the only distinction that gets at the real objective relations structuring the life of the working class, and which isn't ultimately arbitrary. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production, meaning that they are enriched simply through the growth of capital. The proletariat, on the other hand, uses the means of production to create things, ideas or other marketable commodities, or otherwise facilitates the creation or marketing of these commodities. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright characterizes Marx's notion of class within capitalism as follows:

In capitalist society, the central form of exploitation is based on property rights in the means of production. These property rights generate three basic classes: *capitalists* (exploiters), who own the means of production and hire workers; *workers* (exploited), who do not own the means of production and sell their labor power to capitalists; and *petty bourgeois* (neither

¹³⁹ Marx, 1026

¹⁴⁰ Marx, 1026

exploiter nor exploited), who own and use the means of production without hiring others. (Wright, 17)

This general structure gives us the essence of what it is to be a proletarian - what it is to be a worker is to sell one's labor for a living. Thus, whatever other differences they share, workers are all characterized by the fact that their own life has become commodified. They all share also in the systematic dehumanization that is associated with commodification, and the fact that labor has become an alien activity. The recognition of their shared fate and their shared humanity is found in working class solidarity, which functions as the normative glue which holds the worker's movement together. While individuals have been commodified prior to capitalism (either as slaves or as day workers), it is under capitalism that the basis of the economic system is commodified labor. In such a society, workers become reduced to what they can offer on the market. Their ability to lead a flourishing life, or something like it, is entirely dependent on the value of the work they do for others. This value is not set in individual terms, but collectively constrained through the marketplace as every worker is in competition with every other person who can do the same kind of work.

In an interview with a journalist from New York World, Marx describes the significance of solidarity for the International Workingmen's Association he helped to lead:

They must revive the relations between themselves and the capitalists and landlords, and that means they must transform society. This is the general end of every known workmen's organization; land and labor leagues, trade and friendly societies, co-operative production are but means toward it. To establish a perfect solidarity between these organizations is the business of the International Association (Marx)

As solidarity is only possible when subjects view shared interests as having a prescriptive weight over self-interest, it is a fundamentally moral concept. It entails

recognition of one's fellows as an end in themselves which contrasts with the alienated relationship of exchange value. Workers must not relate to one another as commodities, and even less as commodities in competition with one another. Instead, they must relate to one another as human beings with real needs and capacities. Once this is achieved, working class individuals can work together coherently as a universal subject. As all the relations of capitalist society serve to reify relations like the commodity relation, workers must create their own organizations where human relations are not mediated by money and the process of exchange.

In renouncing commodification as the basis for social relations and embracing real needs and capacities, Marx's notion of solidarity recalls the humanistic themes of his early writings. This is not to say that *Capital* is merely a reproduction of the early Manuscripts, and Althusser is correct to note its robustly empirical approach. However, his theory only has practical importance insofar as the working class takes it up as the basis for a rational and humanistic conception of solidarity. Additionally, as we saw last chapter, the historicist approach to human nature was present in the earlier humanistic works. Marx's new scientific and empirical approach is thus additive, and in no ways intended to replace any humanistic commitments on his part. On the contrary, it is only through workers understanding their shared human conditions does the working-class movement gain a sense of solidarity. The prescriptive upshot of his description of capitalism in *Capital* is that working class consciousness must formulate its demands from a theoretically robust and precise understanding of their conditions in capitalism. They cannot merely operate from their experience of alienation but must understand the social mechanisms which cause alienation to address its root causes.

Conclusion

As we've seen, *Capital* is first and foremost a theoretical and scientific text, but in it, Marx also lays out a vision for how capitalism dehumanizes workers through commodifying them. Marx's theory of alienation is fundamental but remains abstract, and his notion of the commodity fetish gives him a theoretical basis to explain the social and economic mechanisms which cause alienation. The working class needs to become conscious how their status within capitalism as a mere human commodity and machine for hire, and how their radical instrumentalization by the bourgeoisie is at odds with the goal of a good life or of healthy intersubjective relations. Moreover, they need to develop solidarity such that they can act collectively. This will allow them to mitigate the harms caused by capitalism and encourage a smooth and speedy transition to a new society. A politically conscious working class makes sure that their norms replace those of the capitalist ruling class, by force if necessary, as this is a necessary condition for the good life. In the next chapter, we will see how Marx incorporates his theory of human nature into *Capital* to describe the formation of collective working-class consciousness. We will see both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat take opposed standpoints on the problem of the working day as well as working conditions, and how these standpoints justify conflicting prescriptive approaches. Finally, we will see how these opposed prescriptive approaches are either refuted or justified for Marx by how they inhibit or advance the intrinsic good of edification.

Chapter 4: The Working Day, Human Development and the Flourishing **Thesis in Marx's Capital**

As Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future is present in the factory system; this education will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as the methods of adding to the efficient of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings. (Marx, 614)

That blessed, harmonious culture which has only once appeared in the history of mankind and was then the privilege of a small body of select aristocrats, will become the common property of all civilized nations. What slaves were to the ancient Athenians, machinery will be to modern man. Man will feel all the elevating influences that flow from freedom from productive toil, without being poisoned by the evil influences which, through chattel slavery, finally undermined the Athenian aristocracy. And as the modern means of science and art are vastly superior to those of two thousand years ago, and the civilization of today overshadows that of the little land of Greece, so will the socialist commonwealth outshine in moral greatness and material well-being the most glorious society that history has thus far known. (Kautsky, 158)

9 to 5
Yeah, they got you were they want you
There's a better life
And you think about it, don't you?

It's a rich man's game
No matter what they call it
And you spend your life
Putting money in his wallet

- *Nine to Five*, Dolly Parton

Over the course of *Capital*, Marx discusses overwork, the development of unhealthy habits, the decay of social relations, underpay, wage theft, high rent, adulterated goods, workplace abuse, the atrophy of individual skill, exploitation within the working class family, slums, the narrowing of human development, loss of agency among workers (and capitalists even), dangerous and unhealthy workplaces, the extraction of unpaid labor (surplus value), child labor, misogyny, racism, the loss of dignity, exposure to pestilence and disease, the theft of traditional forms of sustenance

through primitive accumulation, and various other social ills in the context of capitalist exploitation. These are interdependent facets of a process of dehumanization engendered by the mechanisms of capitalism functioning as a totality. From the process of dehumanization emerges a proletarian social movement which forms its own norms that aim to curtail their suffering. Marx explains and justifies these norms as a response to how capitalism is prohibitive to the flourishing of the worker. The strongest example of this is the ethics of time that the working class develops whereby workers ought to take control over the working day to solve the problems of overwork and underwork. Opposed to the dehumanization produced by capitalism, we also see Marx's positive theory of human development through his response to Owen and his critique of capitalist models of education. This offers a stark contrast to the process of human development in capitalism, whereby the individual is cultivated to meet the ends of capitalist accumulation instead of a flourishing human life. The moral standpoint of the proletariat as outlined in *Capital* criticizes the various harms imposed by capitalism and aspires to free human development and build solidarity, which means proletarian morality is not merely ideological for Marx but intimately interwoven with and justified by his economic analysis and his philosophical anthropology. This chapter will (1) lay out the proletarian and bourgeois standpoints, (2) address the reasons given by Wood and Tucker to deny that Marx's philosophy had a normative component, and (3) establish that Marx does endorse the proletarian standpoint as its values correspond to human nature.

Section 1 of this chapter will lay out the notion of the proletarian standpoint and how this contrasts with the diverse perspectives of real workers. Section 2 describe the

standpoints of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie on the issue of the working day and working conditions. Section 3 will return to the non-moral account, particularly of Wood, to contrast it with my own reading and show why mine is plausible despite his presentation of the textual evidence. Section 4 will contrast the dehumanization of the worker through machinery with the development of “fully human” subjects in Marx’s capital. Finally, Section 5 will deal with the utopian passages of Marx’s *Capital* in volumes I and III. This final section will show not only that Marx had a regulative norm motivating his project, but that Marx retained important moral insights from his early unpublished writings.

The proletariat and class standpoint

Central to the conception of morality for Marx and Engels is the notion of a class standpoint. However, classes are not monolithic and do not share a single perspective on issues. Importantly, for Marx and Engels the individual’s own subjective commitments do not determine the class standpoint. Instead, a class standpoint is a product of the objective relations of a particular class. The empirically existing consciousness of real workers only rises to the level of the proletarian class standpoint once they have consciousness of their material conditions. An individual’s standpoint can differ from their class standpoint in a number of ways. First, an individual’s social relations influence their personal commitments. Second, different groups of workers, such as those of a particular nationality, have distinct viewpoints which emerge from their own local circumstances. Lastly, there are various ideological and cultural influences which can influence an individual subject’s perspective. As workers become

less bound by these influences, their individual perspective moves closer towards the class standpoint.

One issue is how social relations such as family status influences class position. For instance, Goldthorpe argues that one's class is determined by their family relations.¹⁴¹ The class status of the head of household (usually men in contemporary capitalism) determines the class interests of the whole family. Erik Olin Wright disagrees, emphasizing the importance of the individual's relations to the means of production.¹⁴² Marx can easily grant Goldthorpe's insight familial status influences personal commitments, even if he would not agree that it alters our class status. For Marx, the individual's class status is determined to their relations to the means of production. To reconcile Goldthorpe's view with Marx's, Wright introduces an idea of direct and mediated class location.¹⁴³ One's individual class status is their own personal relationship to the means of production, while their mediated class relations are their relations to individuals from other classes. Mediated class relations are important for shaping the individual's own commitments, but not the standpoint of their class. Class standpoint is determined by the objective relationship between that class and the process of production. The proletariat can also differ greatly depending on social conditions. For instance, the United States has a far more notable intersection between being working class and being an ethnic minority than other western economies like Sweden.¹⁴⁴ These kinds of properties are accidental to the working class in general but are essential to the character of the working class within the United States and Sweden.

¹⁴¹ Goldthorpe, 1983

¹⁴² Erik Olin Wright, 1997, 254-255

¹⁴³ Wright, 257-258

¹⁴⁴ Wright, 84

Such differences can propagate conflicts between different groups within a class, such as the racial divisions which undermined class solidarity in the United States.

For the working class to pursue their emancipation, they must become conscious of the social systems described in *Capital*. In his analysis of how this comes to pass, Lukács derives a critical philosophical distinction in Marx's notions of class from his reading of *Capital* - the proletariat differs from the bourgeoisie in that in their work activity, seeming antinomies like subjectivity and objectivity are united. This has significant ontological, epistemic, political and ethical consequences for the working class. As we saw in Marx's views on the *1844 Manuscripts*, the activity of labor necessarily contains both the subject and object, mind and world, and human and nature. To free themselves of the fractured, alienated bourgeois world the working class needs to carve out its own ethos that does not entail exploitation, and workers can only consciously do this once they have understood the social and historical mechanisms described in *Capital*. Central to Lukács's argument on the antinomies of capitalist consciousness is his idea of the standpoint of an economic class, and its corresponding class consciousness. Lukács distinguishes between the imputed class consciousness, or the class consciousness which follows from a true understanding of their class relations and position, and empirical class consciousness, which is the class consciousness which existing workers or capitalists have. Empirical class consciousness is influenced by culture, ideology, and various other forces that have nothing to do with real class interest or material conditions. Engaging in class struggle moves empirical class consciousness closer towards the imputed class consciousness as workers become aware of their real nature and conditions.

The standpoints of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie

In this section, I will give a detailed overview of Marx's claims about the human condition within capitalism. In *Capital* Marx provides the standpoints of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat on their circumstances and describes the moral claims on these standpoints. The moral standpoints of the two classes conflict with one another as they both emerge from different interests, material conditions and social relations. Those like Wood who have an amoral reading of Marx understand these passages to be mere objective descriptions of the challenges facing the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and how those classes come to understand those challenges, while those who think Marx's work has moral undercurrents understand them to be condemning capitalism for the harms it causes. If the Marx who wrote *Capital* still understands and justifies the moral claims of the proletariat through the notion of wellbeing and critique of alienation outlined in his early manuscripts, then the flourishing approach most aptly describes the late Marx's approach to ethics.

The working day

In the chapter titled "The Working Day", Marx discusses the divergence between bourgeois and proletarian interests on the length of the working day. This chapter considers the nature of the working day, how it facilitates or hinders flourishing, the forces which determine its length, and the standpoints of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat on the matter.¹⁴⁵ The chapter begins with the trivial truth that the working day is variable. Yet its variability has limits. If the working day is too short, the worker

¹⁴⁵ Hegel, Marx and Engels have been cited as progenitors of later feminist standpoint theory (Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology", 442). This passage is certainly a strong example of this, as the distinct standpoints of the proletariat and bourgeoisie lead not only to epistemic differences, but differences in values, ethos, etc.

will not be able to produce enough to sustain their own existence. It must be higher than this minimum if the capitalist is to realize any surplus in exchange for their “service”.

There is also a maximum length to the workday representing the fundamental limits on bodily and mental health.

Marx gives an evocative description of the monstrous character of capital and its mode of consuming human beings, and how this shapes the standpoint of the bourgeoisie:

The capitalist has his own views of this point of no return, the necessary limit of the working day. As a capitalist, he is only capital personified. His soul is the soul of capital. But capital has one sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour. Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the worker works is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has bought from him. If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist. (Marx, 342)

As the personification of capital, the capitalist comes to value the worker instrumentally, and thus free time which could allow for personal development and wellbeing is understood to be waste. From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, if the worker wastes their time in this way they are “robbing” the capitalist. After all, subsistence wages are the cost of producing the worker, and paying dearer for a commodity than its cost is wasteful according to bourgeois morality.¹⁴⁶ At this point Marx brings in the voice of the

¹⁴⁶ Marx depicts capital an “animated monster which begins to ‘work’, ‘as if its body were by love possessed’” (Marx, 302). The capitalist is the embodiment of capital itself, or man’s greed alienated and reified into an entity with its own ends. Thanks to the needs of their capital, the capitalist imposes a new ethics of efficiency which centers on their return on investment: “Lastly – and for this purpose our friend has a penal code of his own – all wasteful consumption of raw material or instruments of labour is strictly forbidden, because what is wasted in this way represents a superfluous expenditure of quantities of objectified labour, labour that does not count in the product or enter into its value” (Marx, 303). Capital demands efficiency as a norm

worker, which was previously “stifled in the sound and fury of the production process” (Marx 342). Where the capitalist spoke of the “service” his means of production provides, the worker speaks indignantly about their exploitative wage:

The commodity I have sold you differs from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use creates value, a greater value than it costs. That is why you bought it. What appears on your side as the valorization of capital is on my side an excess expenditure of labour-power. You and I know on the market only one law, that of the exchange of commodities. And the consumption of the commodity belongs not to the seller who parts with it, but to the buyer who acquires it. The use of my daily labour-power therefore belongs to you. But by means of the price you pay for it every day, I must be able to reproduce it every day, thus allowing myself to sell it again. (Marx, 343)

The worker grants the devil his due by acknowledging the bourgeois ethos of fair exchange, but also raises their own need for survival:

Apart from natural deterioration through age etc., I must be able to work tomorrow with the same normal amount of strength, health and freshness as today. You are constantly preaching to me the gospel of “saving” and “abstinence”. Very well! Like a sensible, thrifty owner of property I will husband my sole wealth, my labour-power, and abstain from wasting it foolishly. Every day I will spend, sent in motion, transfer into labour only as much of it as is compatible with its normal duration and healthy development. By an unlimited extension of the working day, you may in one day use up a quantity of labour-power greater than I can restore in three. What you gain in labour, I lose in the substance of labour. Using my labour power and despoiling it are quite different things. (Marx, 343)

The worker demands a new norm for a reasonable working day. Working individuals to the point where their mind and body decay not only prevents flourishing but jeopardizes survival. Notably, Marx inverts the virtue of abstinence towards a proletarian view.

for the sake of its own survival, and the capitalist in turn is given the task of enforcing this norm through their executive decisions within their enterprise. It is competition which forces the capitalist to pay the market rate for the worker’s sustenance, as higher pay counts as inefficiency or waste. Some conscientious capitalists might be able to sacrifice efficiency for the sake of their workers without causing much harm to their enterprise, but the more humanitarian their management is, the less competitive they will be. If they go out of business, then even more ruthless and exploitative firms will replace them anyway.

Where abstinence is imposed on the worker by poverty, it is for the capitalist a means of accumulation. By inverting the virtue of abstinence, the worker instead makes abstinence about carefully shepherding their time to maximize their wellbeing.

The worker comes to turn the liberal concept of exchange against the capitalist. As much as the exchange of labor power is in the capitalist's standpoint a just and free trade of wages for hours worked, from the proletarian's standpoint it is an exchange of labor power for the value produced by that power; "You pay me for one day's labour-power, while you use three days of it. That is against our contract and the law of commodity exchange" (Marx, 343). The worker insists that this is not an appeal to the moral sentiments or principles of the bourgeoisie amid snark at the hypocrisy of the capitalist:

... and I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place. You may be a model citizen, perhaps a member of the R.S.P.C.A., and you may be in the odour of sanctity as well; but the thing you represent when you come face to face with me has no heart in its breast. What seems to throb there is my own heartbeat. I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity. (Marx, 343)

Marx simultaneously identifies a norm which emerges from the worker's indignation while also recognizing that this norm does not weigh on the conscience of the normal capitalist. The capitalist's disregard for the wellbeing of the worker leads the worker to lambast the hypocrisy of bourgeois philanthropy. The capitalist serves the ends of capital, and even if the capitalist as a person might empathize with the misery of others, they have fiduciary obligations to meet.

These two standpoints form an antinomy within capitalism from which the historical dialectic of the working day emerges:

The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and, where possible, to make 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 worker maintains his right as a seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to a particular normal length. There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. (Marx, 344)

The dialectical conflict between two equal rights manifests as a material struggle:

Between equal rights, force decides. Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class (Marx 344)

Our norms regarding the length of the working day are not simply set in stone by the capitalist, even though the overall logic of the system is premised on the bourgeois conception of rights. The working-class notions of morality, justice and flourishing emerges *within* the capitalist conception of rights, or to put it another way the seed of proletarian ethics begins within the womb of capitalism itself. Yet as both conceptions of right are incommensurable, the conflict cannot be adjudicated on moral terms whether or not one or the other is ultimately correct.

Marx argues that the dehumanization of the proletariat extends so far that the bourgeoisie come to systematically break their own obligations to their workers. Marx cites the factory inspectors to show how wage theft is a common practice despite being an obvious breach of contract. Workers are made to work past the clock or are even made to show up before their shift,¹⁴⁷ and their lunch breaks are marginally reduced by

¹⁴⁷ Marx, 349-350

employers for the small benefit of unpaid work.¹⁴⁸ This is because even small amounts of work theft add up to real value:

These ‘small thefts’ of capital from the workers’ meal-times and recreation times are also described by the factory inspectors as ‘petty pilferings of minutes’, ‘snatching a few minutes’ or, in the technical language of the workers, ‘nibbling and cribbling at meal-times.’

It is evident that in this atmosphere the formation of surplus-value by surplus labour is no secret. ‘If you allow me (as I was informed by a highly respectable master) to work only ten minutes in the day over-time, you put one thousand a year in my pocket.’ ‘Moments are the elements of profit.’ (Marx, 352)

No doubt, for Marx this “petty pilfering of minutes” is merely a symptom of the fundamental issue of exploitation, and even if it were abolished the problem of exploitation would persist. The worker is reduced to their contribution in the mechanistic process of production; “The worker is here nothing more than personified labour-time. All individual distinctions are obliterated in that between ‘full-timers’ and ‘half-timers’” (Marx, 352-353). This dynamic has an existential cost on the wellbeing of the worker through the degradation of mind and body. From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie the worker is merely an instrumental source of labor-power:

‘What is a working day? What is the length of time during which capital may consume the labour-power whose daily value it has paid for? How far may the working day be extended beyond the amount of labour-time necessary for the reproduction of labour power itself?’ We have seen capital’s reply to these questions is this: the working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour-power is absolutely incapable of renewing its services. Hence it is self-evident that the worker is nothing other than labour-power for the duration of his whole life, and that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and by right labour-time, to be devoted to the self-valorization of capital. (Marx, 375)

¹⁴⁸ Marx, 352

When Marx uses the term “right” here, he refers to the standpoint of the bourgeoisie on the “free and fair” exchange between capitalist and worker. If the worker “consents” to selling every hour of their life to the capitalist, the capitalist considers those hours to be their property by right.

Marx introduces the concepts of the moral limits of the working day, which refers to a working day which allows for personal development, and the physical or natural limit to the working day, which is the limit beyond which health is degraded faster than it can heal:

Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for social intercourse, for the free play of the vital forces of his body and his mind, even the rest time for Sunday (and that in a country of Sabbatarians!) – what foolishness! But in its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for the growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It haggles over the meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, and grease and oil to the machinery. (Marx, 375-376)

I take Marx’s use of the term “moral” here to be genuine and unironic, and not a reference to the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. There is, at least, no reason to suppose otherwise unless we have already determined that Marx’s philosophy made no normative claims. Though Marx does reference the hypocritical attitude of “Sabbatarians” who send their workers to work on Sunday, he also references education, intellectual development, social functions, social intercourse, and the free play of his mind and body as intrinsic goods that are violated. In my reading, the term “Moral” refers to development, self-realization, and the creation of a meaningful life. Such a reading of the term “moral” is in line with the philosophical anthropology outlined in his

early manuscripts. This reading will not be ultimately confirmed until we address Marx's concept of appropriate development and human flourishing in *Capital* later in this chapter.

Notably, the physical limits of the working day are ignored as well as the moral limits. Workers are overworked to the point of shortening their lives:

It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, renewal and refreshment of the vital forces to the exact amount of torpor essential for the revival of an absolutely exhausted organism. It is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers' period of rest. Capital asks no questions about the length and life of the worker. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility. (Marx, 376)

The farmer who wastes the soil is merely destroying his own capital, but the capitalist who exhausts his worker is degrading a human life. From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, there is no moral harm in either as the farmer and capitalist alike purchased the right to waste the land or the farmer. But from the standpoint of the proletariat, the waste of his life is prohibitive of all the other possible projects that they might want or need to pursue in their life. The exploitation of labor beyond what Marx calls the "natural limits" leads him to pose an important question – why would a capitalist allow the human "machine" they depend on to die of over-exploitation? Inasmuch as he depends on the worker, presumably the preservation of the worker would be an important concern. Marx develops something he briefly alluded to in a

footnote in Chapter 7¹⁴⁹ - the death of the worker is of no cost to the capitalist, unlike the death of a slave or a serf for previous exploiting classes.¹⁵⁰ As long as there are more workers, be that through unemployment, immigration, the dispossession of rural peasants or simple human reproduction, the capitalist can easily replace an “unskilled” worker who is injured, falls sick or dies due to overwork. This leads Marx to conclude that overpopulation is not a bug of capitalism, but a feature.¹⁵¹ There must always be more unemployed workers than there are jobs to keep the wheels of capitalism greased.¹⁵² This allows the capitalist to disregard the moral and physical wellbeing of the worker:

Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so. Its answer to the outcry about the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of overwork, is this: Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)? (Marx, 381)

Again, Marx presents the standpoint of the bourgeoisie in hyperbolic utilitarian terms – the harm of the worker’s pain is outweighed by the value of profit. As an example of the dehumanization brought about by this kind of instrumentalization, Marx offers the story of Mary Anne Walkley, a 20-year-old English seamstress who died in 1863.¹⁵³ He describes how she was working on luxury gowns for elite women, which were in high demand due to the celebrations of the new Princess of Wales, Alexandra. The day before

¹⁴⁹ Marx noted how it is precisely the need for owners to sustain the lives of their “investment” that made slavery a more expensive economic form than free market employment. (Marx, 303 footnote 18)

¹⁵⁰ Marx, 377-378

¹⁵¹ Marx, 380. This is developed in far more detail on his chapter on the Reserve Army of Labor.

¹⁵² Marx’s analysis holds true in our own times. One of the goals of the Volcker Shocks in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States was to end inflation and economic stagnation by increasing unemployment and wrecking the bargaining power of the working class. This ended an era which combined slow growth with relative prosperity for workers in the post-war era.

¹⁵³ Marx, 364

her death, Mary had worked a 26 ½ hour shift in a poorly ventilated room with 30 other women, with their alertness maintained with sherry, port and coffee. The wealth of the privileged customers or her employers did not trickle down to the employees. The seamstresses slept in cramped dormitories with two women in each bunk. Marx quotes the doctor as to her cause of death; “long overs of work in an overcrowded work-room, and too small and badly ventilated bedroom.” (Marx, 365). This passage brings Marx’s general theory of the working day down to the level of a particular woman’s suffering. Capitalism isn’t only a system which unleashes productive forces, will be superseded by socialism, or is founded on exploited labor. It is a system which compels the owners of the means of production to treat women the way Mary was treated. Marx wanted the reader to know Mary’s name and her story. To fully understand the capitalist system, we cannot look only at the function of the whole but how the system shapes the destiny of the individual.

The struggle over the working day and the ethics of productive time

The circumstances of the working class foster a political movement where the workers struggle to impose their own standards. The struggle takes place in a variety of battlefields, from the workplace to parliament. Marx describes in detail the decades of struggle across the 19th century between organizations of capitalists and workers, as well as the influence this struggle had on state policy. Eventually the British state had to intervene on behalf of the wellbeing of their workers. There was a process wherein the state increasingly inserted itself as a regulator between the capitalist and the worker, trying to balance the profit motive of the capitalist with the need to sustain minimum standards of health and sanitation. Regulation itself became a battlefield as the

bourgeoisie and proletariat struggle over its terms. Some industries sought outright exemptions from labor law, some sought to skirt the regulation or confound overworked regulators, and the largest firms gobbled up less competitive rivals.

Eventually, the proletariat forms a distinct set of demands around the working day as a self-conscious political body. This distinct class forwards its own demands over and against the demands of capital. Here, Marx cites a resolution proposed by the London General Council of the International Working Men's Association and passed by its congress in 1866:

'We declare that the limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation will prove abortive ... the Congress proposes eight hours as the legal limit of the working day.' (Marx, 415)

Notably, Marx himself had drafted the resolution in question. He is connecting his theoretical account of capitalism with the obligations which the working class seeks to impose. Now, we have the working-class making demands – what Husami would call a 'counter-norm' – against the standpoint of the capitalist.¹⁵⁴

The working class can make this demand in an organized and self-conscious way because of the discovery of certain fundamental truths through the dialectic of the working day. In essence, the bourgeois conception of freedom is fraudulent in the proletarian standpoint:

¹⁵⁴ Marx's model of proletarian norms is not one where the working class discovers ahistorical rules of justice. The eight-hour working day is not the end goal, but it is a preliminary norm in moving towards humane working conditions. Such a standard imposes recognition of the real material needs of the workers on a systemic level, and raises it as a principle, but this principle is historically contingent. If the conditions present themselves Marx would expect the workers to impose even shorter working days, and in the case of a hypothetical fully emancipated society, the entire concept of a maximum working day would become obsolete.

It must be acknowledged that our worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it. In the market, as owner of the commodity 'labour-power', he stood face to face with other owners of commodities, one owner against another. The contract by which he sold his labour-power to the capitalist was black and white, so to speak, that he was free to dispose of himself. But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he was no 'free agent', that the period of time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it, that the vampire will not let go 'while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited' (Marx, 415-416)

The capitalist has convinced himself and his employees that this trade is a fair trade, but the coercive and unequal dimension of the trade have been concealed. The workers realize their situation and organize around their real needs as a collective:

For 'protection' against the serpent of their agonies, the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins'. *Quantum mutatus ab illo!* (Marx, 416)

For the bourgeoisie the conditions of the workers are a natural and inevitable consequence of the system of capitalism, but for the worker it is a contingent loss of freedom and life which can be curtailed through collective action. Through struggle, the working class crafts an *ethos* or their own way of life, instead of having 'virtues' convenient to the capitalist like bourgeois 'abstinence' imposed on them. Their values express genuine *collective* needs and are motivated primarily by their knowledge of the barriers to their flourishing.¹⁵⁵ Their time and the time of their colleagues and loved ones is something which must be protected. This is why Kautsky calls the struggle for

¹⁵⁵ The Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer comes to similar conclusions about the ethical significance of the bourgeois and proletarian standpoints and how proletarian morality emerges from the lived experience of the working class and not abstract norms in his essay *Marxism and Ethics* (Bauer et al. 1978)

the shorter working day a “*struggle for life*” (Kautsky, 156) When workers become conscious of this, they realize the need for control over their time as a class. The workers carve out free time through their collective economic and political power, and in so doing work towards individual and collective freedom.

In a complementary note to his essay “Marxism and Humanism,” Althusser worries that the “recourse to ethics inscribed in every humanist ideology” will lead to “imaginary treatment of real problems” (Althusser 247). The only solution is to “pose these problems correctly” through “*their scientific names*”. However, we see that Marx used the conclusions of his materialist dialectic to justify proletarian notions of morality. He does not merely show that the working class inevitably organizes around the working day as an issue and that their standpoint on the issue is distinct from that of the bourgeoisie. He is also showing how the results of his empirical research and analysis fits with the normative standpoint of the working class. Marx’s scientific approach aims to give empirical content to that sense of dehumanization, not replace his philosophical anthropology in its entirety. As Althusser acknowledges, Marx knew ethics, aesthetics and other “ideological” aspects of society would remain. Yet Marx does go beyond merely recognizing the continued existence of ethics by using the results of his materialist dialectic to justify this “modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day” which expresses the aspirations of the conscious working class. As Engels argued in 1850,¹⁵⁶ though the enthusiasm and indignation of the proletariat is not sufficient for social progress, it is still necessary for social change. He warns that the struggle for the shorter working day cannot come from sections of the privileged class like the

¹⁵⁶ *MECW vol X*, 271

aristocrats or protectionist bourgeoisie, as the original ten-hours bill was, but from the agency of a self-conscious working class. Speaking of the effect on the proletariat of the struggle for the ten hours day and its eventual repeal by parliament, Engels says the following:

The working classes, in this agitation, found a mighty means to get acquainted with each other, to come to a knowledge of their social position and interests, to organize themselves and to know their strength. The working man, who has passed through such an agitation, is no longer the same as he was before; and the whole working class, after passing through it, is a hundred times stronger, more enlightened, and better organized than it was at the outset. It *was* an agglomeration of mere units, without any knowledge of each other, without any common ties and now it is a powerful body, conscious of its strength ... (Engels, *MECW* 275)

The point is not that ethics or morality is not important, but that it must be alloyed to a strong theoretical understanding of the conditions of the working class as well as a powerful political movement to have any social relevance.

The reserve army of labor

As we've seen, the increase in productivity per worker does not correspond to all workers having shorter working days. The "reserve army" is the mass of unemployed workers who are thrown out of work as the means of production become more efficient. Without unemployment, Marx argues, wages will show a tendency to increase over time beyond the ability of capitalists to secure a profit.¹⁵⁷ Instead, the constant improvement in means of production allow employers to throw some portion of workers into unemployment while increasing their exploitation of the remaining workers. The solution, Marx argues, is that the employed and unemployed workers should band together for the reduction of the working day and the elimination of unemployment.

¹⁵⁷ This situation faced the United States and Western Europe during the post-war stagflation.

Marx argues against Malthus and other English political economists that the surplus army of labor is not a product of natural population growth but the consequence of workers losing their jobs as industry becomes more efficient and as large agriculturalists seize the land peasants used to cultivate. If a firm employs 100 workers, but incorporates new means that double productivity, they can produce twice the volume with the same number of workers. Since demand may not be able to absorb twice as many commodities, the firm can fire many of its workers and still produce more than it did before. Therefore, the improvement in means of production leads to more unemployed workers, which increases the relative power that capitalists have over workers. Due to the relation of supply and demand, the bourgeoisie can now demand longer hours and lower wages due to the increased competition in the labor marketplace.¹⁵⁸ These circumstances create conditions where workers are further immiserated, and the only solution is some form of solidarity between employed and unemployed workers. This alliance should demand shorter working days to ensure that more workers must be employed to meet the demand of goods. As an example of the proletarian standpoint on exploitation, Marx offers a passage from a working-class pamphlet which was itself cited in the reports of the factory inspectors:

The adult operatives at this mill have been asked to work from 12 to 13 hours per day, while there are hundreds who are compelled to be idle who would willingly work partial time, in order to maintain their families and save their brethren from a premature grave through being over-worked ... Those who are worked overtime feel the injustice equally with those who are condemned to forced idleness. There is in the district almost sufficient work to give to all partial employment if fairly distributed. We are only asking what is right in requesting the masters generally to pursue a system of short hours, particularly until a better state of things begins to dawn upon us,

¹⁵⁸ “The relative surplus population is therefore the background against which the law of the demand and supply of labour does its work. It confines the field of action of this law to the limits absolutely convenient to capital’s drive to exploit and dominate the workers.” (Marx, 792)

rather than to work a portion of the hands overtime, while others, for want of work, are compelled to exist upon charity. (Marx 789, footnote 17)

In this pamphlet, we see representatives of the proletariat expressing their own conception of “right” and “justice” in terms of control over their time, such that the workload is distributed as a fair mean among a greater number of people instead of the excess or deficiency on one side or the other. The norms around time ensure that no individual faces either an excess or deficiency in workload. As this norm cannot be manifest due to the power of moral argument, workers form trade unions and other movements to impose these demands:

The movement of the law of supply and demand of labour on this basis completes the despotism of capital. Thus as soon as the workers learn the secret of why it happens that the more they work, the more alien wealth they produce, and that the more the productivity of their labour increases, the more does their very function as a means for the valorization of capital become precarious; as soon as they discover that the degree of intensity of the competition amongst themselves depends wholly on the pressure of the relative surplus population; as soon as by setting up trade unions, etc., they try to organize planned co-operation between the employed and unemployed in order to obviate or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalist production on their class, so soon does capital and its sycophant, political economy, cry out at the infringement of the ‘eternal’ and so to speak, ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand. Every combination between employed and unemployed disturbs the ‘pure’ action of this law. (Marx, 793-794)

Notably, Marx is bringing back his earlier analysis of alienation in his early manuscripts where the power of the working class diminishes as the alien power of capital grows. The demand for shorter working days is a solidaristic demand among workers which is necessary for the flourishing of all. Both overwork and unemployment are harmful, and they both share the same solution – the working day ought to be limited to increase the demand for labor while simultaneously limiting over-work. The development of the virtue of genuine solidarity among workers to take a stand for their collective interests is

a prerequisite for workers to engage in such a movement. At first glance, employed and unemployed workers have antagonistic interests as employed workers are always in competition with unemployed workers, and the recognition of their common interests depends on the development of a shared, class-conscious subjectivity. Naturally, this produces a backlash among capitalists who criticize the cartel-like function of labor unions as going against the ‘eternal’ and ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand.¹⁵⁹ Marx would say that if unions *are* cartels, then all the worse for a principled rejection of economic monopolies. Reifying the law of supply and demand into either a natural principle of the economy or a transcendent moral principle only constrains the worker and damns them to immiseration. Hinting at the bad faith inherent in the bourgeois standpoint, Marx notes how even the capitalists hypocritically ignore this economic law when it is inconvenient for them as was the case in the colonies.¹⁶⁰

Working conditions

Paralleling the problem of the length of the workday and its real impact on human flourishing are the working conditions themselves. This issue shows that the limitations on the working day are necessary but not sufficient for achieving emancipation. On the contrary, as Marx notes in his chapter on machinery, limiting the working day incentivizes greater intensity of labor, which in turn makes working

¹⁵⁹ Notably, pro-market rhetoric today reproduces the exact same criticism (it is not uncommon to discover contemporary rhetoric in Marx’s quotations of the liberals of his own time). For instance, such arguments can be found in contemporary economic conservative and right-libertarian sources such as the Foundation for Economic Education’s website and the Mises institute, as well as economic scholarship.

¹⁶⁰ But on the other hand, as soon as (in the colonies, for example) adverse circumstances prevent the creation of an industrial reserve army, and with it the absolute dependence of the working class upon the capitalist class, capital, along with its platitudinous Sancho Panza, rebels against the ‘sacred’ law of supply and demand, and tries to make up for its inadequacies by forcible means. (Marx, 794)

conditions worse even if they're thankfully shorter.¹⁶¹ The same incentive structure as the one behind the working day is also responsible for creating these miseries. As much as capitalists are incentivized to demand the longest possible working hours, they are also incentivized to invest as little as possible in ensuring decent working conditions for employees while expecting superhuman levels of productivity.

Marx's analysis of working conditions is found across the first volume of *Capital*, but it receives its most systematic treatment in the third volume. In the fifth chapter of the third volume "Economy in the Use of Constant Capital", Marx deals with the consequences of capitalists seeking to efficiently utilize their constant capital, or that part of capital that is made up of property like machines. Capitalists are disincentivized by the structure of the system to invest in constant capital that does not produce value for them. Value for the capitalist is financial return on investment. This leads to the development of many positive things for Marx, such as the creation of machines which are more fuel efficient, faster, easier to maintain, less bulky, made with more accessible materials, etc.¹⁶² Marx makes sure to highlight the gains under capitalism, as it incentivizes efficiency in fuel, energy use and power transmission,¹⁶³ recycling of waste materials,¹⁶⁴ and the invention of new machines.¹⁶⁵

The problem is that the same incentive structure that motivates these improvements also motivates a lack of investment in improving working conditions. For example, powerful machines lacked safety guards which would keep workers from

¹⁶¹ Marx, 533-543

¹⁶² Marx, 174-175

¹⁶³ Marx, 191-195

¹⁶⁴ Marx, 195-198

¹⁶⁵ Marx, 198-199

falling into dangerous areas even though these were required by regulation.¹⁶⁶ This is because regulation does not address the core incentive structure underpinning the evils Marx identifies with capitalism and only addresses the symptoms. The number of accidents only went down after the manufacturers of the machines started putting safety guards on the machines themselves, as the employer had no greater incentive to remove these features than they had to install them in the first place.¹⁶⁷

One of the worst sectors is the coal mining industry, where the difficulty of regulation combined with the poverty of the workforce allowed for extreme disregard for safety:

According to the report on Coal Mine Accidents (6 February 1862), a total of 8.466 had been killed in the ten years 1852-1861. But this number is far too small as the report itself admits ... The very fact that, despite the great butchery that still goes on and the insufficient number and restricted powers of the inspectors, the number of accidents has dropped sharply since the inspection system was established indicates the natural tendency of capitalist exploitation. (Marx, 181-182)

Marx does not pull any punches as to what is responsible for this sordid state of affairs where human beings are sacrificed for profit, identifying it clearly as the vice of the mine owners:

These human sacrifices are due for the most part to the filthy avarice of the coal-owners, who for instance often have only one shaft sunk, so that not only is no effective ventilation possible, but also there is no escape if this shaft gets blocked. (Marx, 182)

Interestingly, while Marx does generally blame the system for the ills of capitalism instead of individuals, here he diverges from this approach by blaming the capitalist

¹⁶⁶ Marx, 184-185

¹⁶⁷ Marx also returns to the situation faced by textile workers like Mary Anne Walkley, as she was killed by a combination of overwork and cramped, dangerous conditions. (Marx, 187)

himself. While Marx attributes much of the harms of alienated labor to the force of competition, he does not reduce the cause of all these harms to competition. As much as capitalism compels capitalists to exploit to sustain their firms, exploitation can still simply be a matter of greed, at least when the choice to exploit is not imposed on firms by the market but is simply a matter of avarice.¹⁶⁸

As we have already seen, where machines and infrastructure are guarded and maintained jealously to protect capital investments, human life is treated as expendable. Marx notes the irony of a system which produces such meticulous concern for the needs of inanimate objects while so utterly disregarding the needs of the workers:

If we consider capitalist production in the narrow sense and ignore the process of circulation and the excesses of competition, it is extremely sparing with the realized labour that is objectified in commodities. Yet it squanders human beings, living labour, more readily than does any other mode of production, squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain as well. In fact it is only through the most tremendous waste of individual development that the development of humanity in general is secured and pursued, in that each epoch of history that directly precedes the conscious reconstruction of human society. Since the whole of the economizing we are discussing here arises from the social character of labour, it is in fact precisely this directly social character of labour that produces this waste of the workers' life and health. (Marx, 182)

Here we see a tragic dimension to capitalism – the good effects of capitalism and the social good it brings entails the suffering of the individual. Marx ends his section on coal miners with a morally compelling question asked by the factory inspector R Baker;

¹⁶⁸ Of course, for Marx the system would still be implicated as the “filthy avarice” of the employers is a virtue not a vice within the logic of capital! This is another sense in which Marx’s thinking echoes Aristotle, as for Aristotle different political constitutions cultivate different vices and virtues, and this is grounds to support or condemn particular political models.

‘The whole question is one for serious consideration, in what way this sacrifice of infant life¹⁶⁹ occasioned by congregational labour can be best averted?’ (Reports of the Inspectors of Factories ... 31 October, 1863, p. 157) (Marx vol 3 181-182)

The naked tragedies described by the factory inspectors incite critical moral enquiries that go beyond passing laws or empowering bureaucracies to punish such behavior. Marx’s text poses the question of how we can create an economic system where the waste of human life is not normalized. Marx’s framing here poses a powerful question - should we rely on a system which must be forced through regulation and state power to regard human life as valuable, and whose leading institutions would be compelled by competition to sacrifice anyone if it was both profitable and permitted?¹⁷⁰ Marx concludes this section by remarking how the notions of efficiency that motivates the positive developments of capitalism entail the dehumanization of the worker; “So much for economy in the means for protecting the lives and limbs of the workers – including many children – from dangers that directly arise from their use of machinery (Marx, 185).”

The surplus population, the “general law of capitalist accumulation,” and the production of human misery

In the chapter of Volume I titled “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation,” Marx ties the existence of the surplus population and its general immiseration to the process of accumulation of capital. As we have seen, accumulation is the entelechy of

¹⁶⁹ It’s not clear why Baker is raising the issue of “infant” life here as the section is discussing the waste of worker’s lives. Is he talking about the death of miners’ babies, or is he using “infant” rhetorically to mean children who toil in the mines? Marx’s own words do not clarify this.

¹⁷⁰ This question poses a further significant challenge for those reformists like Eduard Bernstein that claim an intellectual heritage from Marx – can reforms ever be sufficient to change the nature of such a system?

capital. Due to the incentive structure built into capitalism itself and the quasi-Darwinian process of capitalist competition, Marx argues that accumulation always has certain tendencies. These include centralization, expansion of existing industries, and the adoption of more efficient means of production.¹⁷¹ These processes all either contribute to or depend on the reserve army of labor.

The business cycle causes contradictions for the capitalists as their pursuit of their self-interest creates risks for their businesses. Yet as soon as Marx has described the contradiction for the capitalists, he moves on to the human cost for the workers:

Moreover, the consumption of labor-power by capital is so rapid that the worker has already more or less completely lived himself out when he is only half-way through his life. He falls into the ranks of the surplus population, or is thrust down from a higher to a lower step in the scale. It is precisely among the workers in large-scale industry that we meet with the shortest life-expectancy. ... Under these circumstances, the absolute increase of this section of the proletariat must take a form which swells their numbers, despite the rapid wastage of their individual elements. (Marx, 795)

The law of general accumulation reveals another absurd conclusion in capitalism - the worst paid elements of the working class is the fastest growing mass of workers. Marx does not mince words about the rationality of such a system:

This law of capitalist society would sound absurd to savages, or even to civilized colonists. It calls to mind the boundless reproduction of animals individually weak and constantly hunted down. (Marx, 797).

The laws of accumulation seem rational and natural to those within it, but those outside of it are fully aware of both the irrationality and contingency of these laws.

¹⁷¹ Centralization means firms achieve better economies of scale which allows them to lay off workers. Expanding the existing means of production depends on unemployed workers ready to hand to fill the new jobs. Adopting more efficient means of production is more complex, as generally it allows businesses to fire employees, but frequently the new means of production require new employees with different skill sets, or conversely facilitate the hiring of previously unemployable populations like women and children.

In section 4 of this chapter, Marx describes three groups in the reserve army of labor, characterized both by their genesis and their fate. First, there is the floating part of the reserve army, which is generated by the constant push and pull of the business cycle. Second, there is the latent part, which are rural people traditionally employed in agriculture but available for capitalist employment. Third, there is the stagnant part who are generally stuck in a state of pauperism. The brutality of the system is most notable in its production of paupers and lumpen proletarians who are disregarded by the system due to their lack of productivity:

Pauperism is the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army. Its production is included in that of the relative surplus population, its necessity is implied by their necessity; along with the surplus population, pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist development of wealth. It forms part of the *faux frais* of capitalist production: but capital usually knows how to transfer these from its own shoulders to that of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. (Marx, 797)

The biting irony here is that a liberal system theoretically upholds the abstract equality and value of every free individual, but in practice leaves many individuals to rot when they cannot provide for the system. Their very existence is a *faux frais* – “incidental expense” – and often one not paid by large capitalist stakeholders themselves, but by workers and small businesses.

From all these processes, Marx provides critiques of the immiseration which results from capitalist accumulation. Once again, the purpose is to show that suffering is not an unfortunate reality that happens to exist alongside capitalism but is a feature of the system itself. The theory is simply that capital accumulation both depends on and

produces human suffering through the business cycle.¹⁷² Wealth is the product of poverty, and conversely poverty is the product of wealth. Once again, capital takes a monstrous form confronting the worker as a hostile force:

On the basis of capitalism, a system in which the worker does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the worker, the law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production can be set in motion by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power, thanks to the advance in the productivity of social labour, undergoes a complete inversion, and is expressed thus: the higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital. (Marx, 798)

Precarity increases as capital grows, ironically due to the effort of these very same precarious workers. Explicitly returning to his concept of alienation, Marx ties all the dehumanizing and misery-producing dimensions of capitalism to his general law of accumulation:

... within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation for the producers; they distort the worker into a fragment of a man, they degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, they destroy the actual content of his labour by turning it into a torment; they alienate [entfremden] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they deform 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 behind the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the production of surplus value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes, conversely, a means for the development of those methods. (Marx, 799)

¹⁷² Marx, 798

We see here how capital inverts the virtuous and edifying nature of labor into a means of domination, fragmentation, exploitation, degradation, and alienation. In doing this, capital deforms work itself into something hateful and despotic, deprives workers of free time, and enslaves their families. Marx puts the suffering of the proletariat in the process of accumulation in seemingly moral terms:

Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding to the accumulation of wealth. *Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.* [emphasis added] (Marx, 799)

By “moral degradation”, Marx refers to the habituation of vice among the workers due to their terrible working conditions. We can see how the effects of capitalism on the workers is of central importance to Marx, not only as an incidental phenomenon but a necessary effect of capitalism’s own functioning. These dimensions of capitalism are in no way fatal contradictions for capitalism the way the declining rate of profit is. Capital can happily sit back and watch workers suffer while they remain profitable. These facts are only relevant for the development of an autonomous proletarian sense of morality and human flourishing.

The non-moral reading – mechanics and ideology

Whereas I read *Capital* as having an implicit moral critique of capitalism through the aspects of immiseration listed here, the amoral interpretation like that offered by Althusser, Tucker or Wood understands these passages as strictly descriptive. For instance, Wood’s argument for an amoral reading of Marx centers on three important

claims: first, Marx prioritizes “non-moral goods” and disregards “moral goods” like justice or duty; second, Marx views the evils of capitalism in mechanistic terms in a way that excludes individual responsibility and makes the evils of capitalism a tragic inevitability; and third, morality is merely a function of ideology. To make a moral reading plausible, it is necessary to address these concerns.

Wood rightly denies that Marx is a deontologist or a utilitarian. However, Wood’s dismissal of a moral framework based on a quasi-Aristotelian notion of the “good life” is too brief. Though he recognizes that Marx is concerned with the self-actualization of potentiality, Wood considers this to be a “non-moral good” whose moral status for Marx is equivalent to other “non-moral goods” like water, food, and entertainment.¹⁷³ To establish that Wood’s interpretation is mistaken, we must show that Marx opposes capitalism not only because of the immiseration that it produces but because it creates social relations and ways of life that are contrary to the human good. Moreover, if Marx has an ethics of social flourishing, then “non-moral goods” are morally relevant insofar as withholding biological or social necessities to discipline workers is a symptom of social alienation that inhibits their wellbeing.

We can question whether Wood’s distinction between moral and non-moral goods is so clear for non-utilitarians. Aristotle and many other philosophers are concerned with distributive justice, the intuition being that people deserve to receive some portion of the non-moral good. Capitalists, slave-owners and feudal magnates argue, however, that depriving workers of non-moral goods maintains efficiency, profitability and worker discipline. Thus, they turn austerity into a moral norm, and

¹⁷³ Wood, 1981, 126

punish those who violate this norm. Marx notes at one point in *Capital* that in the Elizabethan area, the English government instituted a *maximum* wage, with harsher punishments on the “overpaid” workers than their employers!¹⁷⁴ For Marx to argue that everyone ought to receive some portion of the “non-moral” good as he does explicitly in the “Critique of the Gotha Program” is itself a moral claim that contrasts with this value of austerity.

Wood also appeals to the fact that Marx treats the evils of capitalism as the consequence of mechanistic systems.¹⁷⁵ In this line of thinking, social mechanisms can't be morally blameworthy any more than an earthquake or a hurricane. Marx uses Newtonian language in describing these processes as laws that predict the motion of social and economic forces. Marx argues that social systems are only ever internally Newtonian in that their laws are not absolute axioms embedded in the structure of nature itself so much as internally valid regularities. As capitalism is a human creation and not a state of nature, laws like the general law of accumulation or supply and demand emerge from reification – they are either human creations, or the inadvertent products of human creations. Even if a capitalist comes to believe that exploitation, alienation, overwork etc. are morally wrong, as they are lawlike functions of the system itself, these practices will continue so long as the system remains:

But looking at these things as a whole, it is evident that this does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him. (Marx, 381)

¹⁷⁴ Marx, 900-901

¹⁷⁵ Wood, 1981, 152-153

In fact, the capitalist will only come up against the apparent necessity of these social evils. The obvious consequence will not be better living standards or an end to exploitation and alienation for workers, but a very depressed, pessimistic and guilty capitalist. As much as Marx or an impoverished worker might get a sense of *schadenfreude* at the self-loathing of this conscientious confessional capitalist, that won't address the worker's real needs.

The mechanistic nature of capitalism makes its harms at least somewhat inevitable. This runs against the grain of other moral philosophies which hold that evil or immorality is a failure to act according to good will (e.g., Kant) or a failure to properly adopt a utilitarian calculus (e.g., Bentham, Mill). In these views, evil could have been avoided simply if people were more consistent moral theorists. For Marx on the other hand, social evils like alienation, exploitation and oppression are simply a tragic, inevitable consequence of the laws of a particular economic system. This sense of tragedy is not unlike Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, where the social institutions of her time necessarily bound her to the contrary laws of religion and state, and it was only through reflecting upon the suffering of characters in her situation that society could discover how to resolve these contradictions.¹⁷⁶ The working class ultimately has the ability and responsibility to abolish these tragedies, but this eventuality depends on the existence of these tragedies in the first place as industrial socialism emerges out of the collapse of capitalism. Yet this notion of moral tragedy does not mean Marx is entirely deterministic about human suffering. The book was intended to help guide the proletariat as the class capable of grasping human destiny. In his preface to the second

¹⁷⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 436

edition, Marx states as much. He begins by noting how a German worker, living in a society with less major industry, might look upon the English worker as condemned to a state of severe exploitation and their subjection to a system which prioritizes profit over their lives.¹⁷⁷ Marx responds by arguing that the Germans merely live at a lower stage of economic development, meaning that they will eventually face the same economic conditions. They ought to learn from the English experience to lessen the misery of capitalism:

There [the Continent] it [the development of capitalism] will take a form more brutal or more humane, according to the degree of development of the working class itself. ... One nation can and should learn from others. Even when a society has begun to track down the natural laws of its movement – and this is the ultimate aim of this work to reveal the economic law of motion of modern society – it can neither leap over the natural phases of its development nor remove them by decree. *But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.* [Emphasis Added] (Marx, 92)

This passage reveals that Marx still saw a prescriptive value in the text of shortening or lessening the harms caused by capitalism. Though Marx is a materialist, he rejects reductive mechanistic approaches to materialism which reduce thought and agency to mere epiphenomena – as Lenin quipped in his notes on Hegel, “Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism,” and Soviet Dissident Raya Dunayevskaya noted that “Marxism may be said to be the most idealistic of all materialistic philosophy” (Dunayevskaya, 42). Thus, Marx can recognize the capacity of German workers to learn from the experience of English workers and act within the constraints of their conditions to minimize similar risks.

¹⁷⁷ Marx, 90

A related argument against a moral reading might stem from Marx's denial of individual responsibility. Marx frequently does mention the hypocrisy, ruthlessness and avarice of the bourgeoisie. However, Marx does not consider the fundamental problems of capitalism to have ethical, psychological or ideological causes. Insofar as he does have a theory of moral responsibility, it is generally a class as a whole and not individuals who hold ultimate responsibility. Inasmuch as a capitalist believes that greed is good, this is because these are the norms reinforced by his class position. Insofar as a capitalist does come to moral revulsion or systemic critique of capitalism, competition restricts his freedom to act upon his sentiments. In Marx's preface to the first edition, Marx acknowledges that the capitalist is often vicious, and conversely can understand the human costs of capitalism or its contradictions, but emphasizes that the moral views of the capitalist have little causal consequence:

To prevent possible misunderstandings, let me say this. I do not by any means depict the capitalist and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [Träger] of particular class-relations and interests. My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them. (Marx, 92)

The capitalist may be greedy, avaricious, cruel or hypocritical, but her status as a capitalist will no doubt reward such dispositions. She may rise above the limitations of the bourgeois standpoint on a subjective level, but her class status will still demand that she behave in a greedy and avaricious way if she hopes to remain competitive. If she rejected her class status altogether, this would do nothing to solve the problem for the workers since her former competitors would only take advantage of her retreat. Marx knew that capitalists could personally come to oppose capitalism, as was the case with

his friend, benefactor and fellow theorist Engels. Yet he also knew that people like Engels could not act as individual capitalists to solve the problem. This does not mean Marx rejects any notion of responsibility. Sympathetic capitalists can still raise above the bourgeois standpoint and aid the proletariat in their struggle. Proletarians on the other hand have the responsibility to become conscious of the causes of their conditions and work to correct them. In fact, proletarians have the unique historical task of emancipating all people, regardless of class, from the chains of reified hierarchies.

The non-moral reading can also argue that for Marx, different moralities are mere ideological instruments of various classes with incommensurable claims to authority.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, their moral claims only ever have an internal validity. In this case, the side we choose is merely a matter of personal interest or sentiment and not because we are in agreement with their moral claims. Yet Marx does give reasons when he comes down on the side of the proletarian standpoint. Moreover, as we have seen, Marx does suggest several times that capitalists can and sometimes do grasp the proletarian standpoint, and that capitalism is dehumanizing to the bourgeoisie too, even if there is little they can do as individuals to alleviate these issues. He thinks workers ought to pursue their flourishing as a class, which entails the abolition of class itself. Though the pursuit of that end cannot negate the tragic course of history, it can limit the harms of capitalism and accelerate the creation of a less alienating and exploitative society.

¹⁷⁸ Wood, 1981, 128, 143

The chapter on machines, maldevelopment and the positive theory of human development

If Marx's moral theory is grounded on a notion of human flourishing as I argue, then we must be able to situate these passages within a theory of human nature, proper development and the good life. Marx's theory of human development in *Capital* is fleshed out in his section on education found in his chapter on machines. This chapter develops two important themes. First, Marx connects the rise of machinery, overwork, and the strict division of labor to the maldevelopment of individuals under capitalism. Second, there is the possible course of human development under an alternative social organization that is more adequate for human flourishing, both on the individual and social level. The second course of development is explicated with the assistance of the English Utopian Robert Owen. This section offers further evidence that Marx is not abandoning the philosophical anthropology of his early manuscripts and its attendant values of self-realization and development through social labor. On the contrary, Marx has revised his ideas to tie his philosophical anthropology to real social processes and institutions that can be empirically studied.

Machines and human maldevelopment under capitalism

Capitalism imposes maldevelopment on individuals for two reasons. First, as a social organism, the individual is shaped and molded by their social activity. The more time one devotes to an activity, the more it will go on to shape their development. As the needs of capital require the smallest number of people to devote the greatest amount of time to a particular task, humans are naturally condemned to spending inordinate time on the same set of tasks. Second, capital as an institution cannot value human

development as an end in itself. To survive, capital must demand that workers devote themselves to tasks that develop their subjectivity in narrow ways without regarding the character of that development.

The change from tools and manufacture to machines and factories is an essential component to maldevelopment in capitalism. Marx initially poses the paradox that machinery at first glance ought to be a godsend to the workers in making work easier and less time intensive. Yet machinery in capitalism has the paradoxical effect of increasing working hours:

Hence too the economic paradox that the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital's disposal for its own valorization. 'If', dreamed Aristotle, the greatest thinker of antiquity, 'if every tool, when summoned, or even by intelligent anticipation, could do the work that befits it, just as the creation of Daedalus moved of themselves, or the tripods of Hephaestus went of their own accord to their sacred work, if the weavers' shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master craftsmen, or of slaves for the lords.' And Antipater, a Greek poet of the time of Cicero, hailed the water-wheel for grinding corn, that most basic form of all productive machinery, as the liberator of female slaves and the restorer of the golden age. Oh those heathens! They understood nothing of political economy and Christianity, as the learned Bastiat discovered, and before him the still wiser MacCulloch. They did not, for example, comprehend that machinery is the surest means of lengthening the working day. They may perhaps have excused the slavery of one person as a means to the full human development of another. But they lacked the specifically Christian qualities which would have enabled them to preach the slavery of the masses in order that a few crude and half-educated parvenus might become 'eminent spinners', 'extensive sausage-makers' and 'influential shoe-black dealers'. (Marx, 532-533)

Marx thinks, with the ancients, that the most appropriate use of machinery is to alleviate and shorten labor to facilitate human development. Yet this is the exact opposite of how machinery gets used. Marx explains the paradox through the need for

return on investment.¹⁷⁹ In mechanized industry, an increased portion of the cost is locked up in physical constant capital as opposed to wages. These machines only last so long before natural forces like rust and corrosion limit their productivity,¹⁸⁰ and they become obsolete as more efficient machines enter the market. Consequently, to make a return on their investment capitalists must work the machines more intensely. They demand longer working hours in the hope of “using up” the machine before time and technological progress make it useless, to the point where workers must spend most of their waking life operating the machines. Consequently, what ought to make life easier, less exploitative and less demeaning for workers in fact makes life more odious.¹⁸¹

The ease of machine work has another unfortunate consequence for the worker in making work more alienating. The early division of labor under manufacture is conducive to human development. As the worker must bring together various capacities, the employer must value the person as a whole. The mental and physical health of the worker as well as their continued development was necessary for profit. With machinery however, the labor process gets broken up into simplified objective processes. The

¹⁷⁹ Marx, 492, 528

¹⁸⁰ “Use is not answerable to human needs alone as the objective properties of every object of labor determines the trajectory of their use. Machines, tools and raw materials have varying shelf lives and are subject to varying kinds of decay and devaluation, which compels individuals to utilize these objects efficiently.” (Marx, 289-290)

¹⁸¹ The machines have other far-reaching implications for the working class. As tools require greater physical strength and skill to use, early skilled manufacture was generally prohibitive of women and children. Within manufacture, an empowered male workforce could bargain for higher prices to support their families, while machinery brings their entire families into the factories. This leads to greater immiseration of all workers, as while women and children have new freedom to earn income as workers, they also cause more competition in the labor market. Moreover, now women and children trade the domestic oppression of patriarchy for the various harms of the workplace that have already been discussed, like harsh working conditions and long hours. Working class individuals become increasingly exchangeable and therefore expendable, as any worker can do any number of different factory jobs.

worker functions merely as a part of the machine which makes their development irrelevant for the capitalist:

Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost; at the same time, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity. Even the lightening of labor becomes an instrument of torture, since the machine does not free the worker from the work, but rather deprives the work itself of all content. Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour process but also capital's process of valorization, has this in common, but it is not the worker who employs the conditions of his work, but rather the reverse, the conditions of work employ the worker. (Marx, 548)

This reduction of the worker to an object in a mechanistic process leads to the total disregard of the edifying qualities of labor that Marx values as intrinsic to human freedom and the good life. The progressive development of the means of production in capitalism is therefore also a vicious process of regression in the working-class subject. The harmful excesses of machinery motivated the Factory Acts that regulated work conditions and ensured education:

The moral degradation which arises out of the exploitation by capitalism of the labour of women and children has been so exhaustively presented by F. Engels in his *Condition of the Working Class in England*, and by other writers too, that a mere mention will suffice here. But the intellectual degeneration artificially produced by transforming immature human beings into mere machines for the production of surplus value (and there is a very clear distinction between this and the state of natural ignorance in which the mind lies fallow without losing its capacity for development, its natural fertility) finally compelled even the English parliament to make elementary education a legal requirement before children under 14 years could be consumed 'productively' by being employed in those industries which are subject to the Factory Acts. (Marx, 522-523)

The Factory Acts sought to limit the human costs caused by excessive exploitation by imposing regulations on capital, though these regulations were not universally applied nor sufficiently enforced. Marx presents the Factory Acts as a mixed bag, though entirely insufficient to deal with the problems they were intended to fix.

The mechanization of work also intensifies the worst aspects of alienated labor.

The machine further erodes the worker's freedom, and in so doing further degrades the health and psychological wellbeing of the working class:

Every sense organ is injured by the artificially high temperatures, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by the deafening noise, not to mention the danger to life and limb among machines which are so closely crowded together, a danger which, with the regularity of the seasons, produces its list of those killed and wounded in the industrial battle. The economical use of the means of production, matured and forced as in a hothouse by the factory system, is turned in the hands of capital into systematic robbery of what is necessary for the life of the worker while he is at work, i.e. space, light, air and protection against the dangerous or the unhealthy concomitants of the production process, not to mention the theft of appliances for the comfort of the worker. Was Fourier wrong when he called factories 'mitigated jails'? (Marx, 552-553)

Consequently, machinery only exacerbates the most despotic tendencies in capitalism by reducing the worker to the mere implement of the capitalist's overall productive plan.

On the one hand, the division of labor does promise great efficiency, but on the other hand it is the division of labor which condemns individuals to a life devoted to narrow, repetitive tasks:

As we have seen, large-scale industry sweeps away by technical means the division of labour characteristic of manufacture, under which each man is bound hand and foot for life to a single specialized operation. At the same time, the capitalist form of large-scale industry reproduces this same division of labour in a still more monstrous shape; in the factory proper, by converting the worker into a living appendage of the machine; and everywhere outside the factory by the sporadic use of machinery and machine workers, or by the introduction of the labour of women, children and unskilled men as a new foundation for the division of labour. (Marx, 614-615)

This creates a contradiction between the division of labor under manufacture and that within large scale industry. Automated industry does not replace manufacture in one fell swoop, and in fact the spread of machinery creates new need for skilled technicians as well as 'unskilled' industrial workers. Where large scale industry demands and develops

minimal skill on the part of the worker, manufacture requires highly skilled workers. If children are increasingly absorbed into large-scale industry without being educated, there won't be the supply of more technically proficient and adaptive adults needed for remaining manufacture.

In one example of the degeneration of the working class, Marx describes how young boys are drawn into the printing industry and worked long hours to the point that they rarely have an opportunity to develop skills that will sustain them into adulthood. This causes them to be drawn to crime, and efforts “to procure them employment elsewhere come to grief owing to their ignorance and brutality, their mental and bodily degradation” (Marx, 615). They aren't maldeveloped by any ill will on the part of the capitalist, but because the capacities they do develop are so limited and narrow. The immediate cause is the machine, which stripped labor of the more edifying system of apprenticeship. Marx describes in detail the rise of early movements like the Luddites who, as *déclassé* petty bourgeois artisans being rapidly cast into the proletariat through the loss of their business, blamed new productive technologies for their hardships and proceeded to smash industrial machines.¹⁸²

Marx cites one John Bellers, a 17th century Quaker political economist who describes the “hytropy” and “atrophy” of individuals at either ends of the class spectrum. He is notably one of the few figures from English political economy that Marx cites positively besides Smith and Ricardo. Bellers's point is that the bourgeoisie narrowly develop skills required for good management at the expense of practical, moral, cultural or scientific knowledge. Their narrow understanding allows them to

¹⁸² Marx, 553

thrive on the market but not much else. One cinematic depiction of such a character is Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*, whose genius allows him to build a fossil fuel empire at the expense of developing the capacity for authentic human relationships. On the other end of the spectrum, the work of the worker is stripped down to the simplest elements possible. In this respect, the relationship between work and development is both the strength of the human being and their Achilles's Heel, as it is this need which ensures that the imbalanced work-life incentivized by capitalism inevitably leads to malformed individuals.¹⁸³

The development of fully human subjects

In articulating an alternative framework for human development, Marx approvingly cites the educational model of the English utopian socialist Robert Owen. Marx contrasts the miseducation model prevalent in untrammelled capitalism with Owen's theory of education and its emphasis on the production of "fully developed" humans:

As Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future is present in the factory system; this education will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as the methods of adding to the efficient of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings. (Marx, 614)

¹⁸³ Some 20th century Marxists have argued that this process has only gotten worse. Braverman argues in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* that labor becomes more simplified and precisely managed with the development of Taylorism. This leads to a working class which is in many respects disempowered and deskilled in a way which was not the case in Marx's era, though Marx did describe similar trends in that direction.

In the view of Owen and Marx, everyone ought to have access to many qualitatively different forms of development.¹⁸⁴ The factory is the germ of the future education model in spite of its alienating characteristics under capitalism because its efficiency frees time for personal development, and because the factory contains the various moments of productive rationality within its walls. Everyone would be introduced to the skills required to participate in management, repair, and produce as far as their individual talents will allow, and this will be done efficiently with the end goal of producing the most developed human beings.

Beyond a certain point, it becomes decreasingly productive to devote time to a single pursuit.¹⁸⁵ Notably however, Marx describes how these conditions are changing, albeit in limited ways, thanks to the education and health clauses of the Factory Acts.¹⁸⁶ The positive theory of human development contrasts with the description of the human condition under capitalism. Where capital treats workers merely instrumentally and imposes work conditions that deform and degenerate the individual, society ought to

¹⁸⁴ It is interesting to note how the Saint-Simonian notion of education differs from that of Owen and Marx. In the Tenth Session of the exposition on Saint-Simon, the focus is on teaching the right sentiments to students. This calls attention to an interesting lack of analysis on the issue of sentiments on the part of Marx.

¹⁸⁵ As evidence, Marx cites reports that students who receive the broadest possible education make the most gains across the board. By mixing work, gymnastics and instruction, each student gets the greatest possible benefit from each of these. When a student takes a break from one activity and pursues another, the intellectual and physical capacities involved in that activity can rest. Marx cites the factory reports as evidence for this claim, as well as the observations of Senior (who Marx is otherwise generally scathing towards): “He shows there, among other things, how the monotonous, unproductive and long school day undergone by the children of the upper and middle classes uselessly adds to the labor of the teacher, ‘while he not only fruitlessly but absolutely injuriously, wastes the time, health and energy of the children’” (Marx, 613-614)

¹⁸⁶ Paltry as the education clauses of the Act appear on the whole, they do proclaim that elementary education is a compulsory pre-condition for the employment of children. The success of those clauses proved for the first time the possibility of combining education and gymnastics with manual labour, and consequently of combining manual labour with education and gymnastics. (Marx, 613)

treat every individual as an ends in themselves. To create the conditions for human flourishing, education must treat individuals as a totality of different possible needs and capacities. Sean Sayers summarizes Marx's notion of edification in terms of a generalized development of the individual that balances work with leisure to facilitate the good life:

... it is the idea of the all-round and universal development of all sides of our nature. And this implies *both* an unalienated and attractive work life, and also sufficient leisure to consume the products of labour and to develop ourselves in other ways. (Sayers, 34)

This entails holistic intellectual, moral, technical and physical development for everyone, as well as sufficient time for rest, enjoyment and recuperation. This is the *ethos* or social life most appropriate to human nature itself. Instead, the nature of the division of labor under capitalism condemns people to devoting their time to singular tasks. A society might condemn farmworkers to spend their waking hours exposed to harmful chemicals, taxi and rideshare drivers to hours cruising for a random assortment of clients, academics to a publish or perish culture, doctors to hours of charting after their normal work-day, the need of all professionals to the need to check their email on off-hours, etc.

The section on education, alongside Marx's treatment of the harms of capitalism challenges the readings of Tucker, Wood and Althusser with its Aristotelian treatment of human flourishing. Their reading is understandable, as Marx neglects to directly address how he uses moral concepts in the book. Yet if we isolate and systematize the passages where ethical judgements are made in the text, it becomes apparent that his general notion of the good life found in his early works as well as a concept of appropriate human development remains essential in how he understands both the

harms caused by capitalism and what he thinks an alternative social arrangement ought to look like. The various harms Marx identifies from the long working day, poor working conditions and unemployment are all harms insofar as they impede proper human development. These concerns are of central importance to the moral standpoint of the proletariat.

The juxtaposition of existing conditions and the future system

We have seen that Marx's theory of human nature and appropriate development found in the early manuscripts carry over into his late work, but to determine whether he has a full moral theory we must look at how his accounts of human nature, appropriate development and the human condition under capitalism motivate his political and economic aspirations. Throughout *Capital*, Marx juxtaposes the conditions he describes under capitalism with a future emancipated society. Some of these passages, especially those in the second volume, focus on technical questions like the circulation of goods while others speak to Marx's conviction that the socialist society is morally superior. The first example of such a passage is found in the first chapter in his response to capitalist "Robinsonades", or theories of human nature and behavior that emerge from a Robinson-Crusoe-style story of an isolated individual. Opposed to such mythical thought experiments, Marx envisions a society no longer bound by relations of commodity production:

Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. All the characteristics of Robinson's labour are repeated here, but with the difference that they are social instead of individual ... The total product of our imagined association is a social product. One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But

another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided amongst them. (Marx, 172)

In this passage, Marx's idea of species-being returns in the form of the "full self-awareness as one single social labour force". In the emancipated "association of free men", human beings are no longer atomized individuals dominated by the blind necessity of reified economic laws but are able to fully realize their nature as a collective agent. This is a realization of human potential that is impossible not only for the proletariat but for the bourgeoisie under capitalism, as evidenced by the fact that the capitalist is also constrained and alienated through competition.¹⁸⁷ Marx follows this with a description of how labor responsibilities will be distributed:

The way this division is made will vary with the particular kind of social organization of production and the corresponding level of social development attained by the producers. ... Labour-time would in that case play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the correct proportion between the different functions of labour and the various needs of the associations. On the other hand, labour-time also serves as a measure of the part taken by each individual in the common labour, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, both towards their labour and the products of their labour, are here transparent in their simplicity, in production as well as in distribution. (Marx, 172)

The transparency of social relations towards both work and the object of work are the negation of the alienation from the process and object of labor described in the *1844 Manuscripts*. What is good and desirable about this future society is that social relations are no longer concealed behind layers of alienation but are apparent, which is to say that our alienation from species-being has also been negated. Where the current system

¹⁸⁷Adam Schaff makes an important consideration in the conclusion of *Marxism and the Human Individual*, which is that this removes conditions that produce unhappiness but this does not necessarily lead to happiness (Schaff, 253-254)

normalizes alienation and exploitation, the future society distributes according to one's contribution to society.¹⁸⁸

In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx introduces freedom as an essential of human flourishing:

The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. (Marx 1981, 959)

Marx's concept of freedom is shaped by Hegel's notion that freedom comes from the recognition of necessity.¹⁸⁹ The individual is free when they recognize their place within the historical totality, how their circumstances are shaped by external forces and how their actions in turn shape their conditions. For Marx, this takes the form of rationally planning the human activity that meets biological and social needs to make it most adequate for human nature:

Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. (Marx 1981, 959)

Here, Marx refers to three important concepts. First there is his concept of metabolism, or *Stoffwechsel*, a term Marx gets from the German chemist Liebig.¹⁹⁰ The second concept is the domination of a blind power, which references the control which capital, a

¹⁸⁸ Notably, Marx is probably not suggesting this as a final end of social development as its content corresponds to the "lower stage" of socialism he discusses in the Critique of the Gotha Program, but it is nonetheless more adequate for human wellbeing than capitalist norms.

¹⁸⁹ Hegel, *Logic*, section 158

¹⁹⁰ (Marx 1981, 878) *Stoffwechsel* refers to the movement of energy and matter between man and nature, and it can be done in a sustainable way or in a way that causes ecological decay. The concept is important to environmentalist readings of Marx such as that of John Bellamy Foster (Foster, John Bellamy, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology" 1999)

human creation, has gained over all classes (even the capitalists that capital ought to serve). This recalls Marx's theory of alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*, as human beings come to be dominated by an irrational and alien force which they have created through their labor. The third concept is of human nature and what is "worthy and appropriate" for it, which recalls the philosophical anthropology and conception of the good life found in the *Manuscripts*. This is a clearly normative concept on Marx's part that grounds his conception of the good life in human nature. Specifically, the good life is rooted in the social and self-conscious development and fulfillment of new, meaningful needs, both in ourselves and others, and depends upon a sustainable metabolism between man and nature.

The ultimate manifestation of human freedom is not in the rational and collective governance of necessity and metabolism with nature, but human development itself:

But this remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. (Marx 1981, 959)

Here, Marx identifies human flourishing with the development of needs beyond those imposed by necessity. Notably, this passage does seem to diverge from Marx's valorization of labor in his early manuscripts. Where labor is presented in the manuscripts as the fundamental activity of a good life, in this passage it seems as if labor is merely a means to an end.¹⁹¹ However there is still an important consistency, which is

¹⁹¹ These two strands of Marx's thought can be seen in contemporary leftist discourse, such as the debate between anti-work thinkers like Gorz and Marcuse and pro-work thinkers like Braverman and Fromm. Unfortunately, Marx himself does not provide a clear reconciliation. However, there are a few compatible possibilities that might contribute to such a reconciliation: (1) the "true realm of freedom" is not necessarily time that is unproductive or private, and can include not only personal hobbies but art, entertainment and other kinds of culturally productive, collective and personally edifying labor; (2) both are necessary components to the

that both this passage and the manuscripts argue that working merely for biological necessity or social utility is dehumanizing. This “true realm of freedom” is equivalent to Aristotelian contemplative leisure, but is more expansive in that it includes any culturally or personally edifying activity (that might, by extension, include contemplation but also art, culture etc). Notably, though Kautsky will later argue that this realm of freedom will facilitate leisure for the workers, he also emphasizes that it will facilitate education and cultural edification.¹⁹² After all, as we saw, labor for Marx includes not only the production of objects but the continued production and reproduction of the subject themselves and the developments of new capacities. Marx’s point is to minimize that labor which has little or no edifying quality while expanding the space for labor which does. This can be done through automating the former or by distributing it more evenly across the wider population.

By describing the development of human powers as an end in itself, Marx is proposing a universal normative principle to strive towards. Marx connects this realization of freedom and development to a central proletarian norm that returns through all three volumes of *Capital*; “The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite” (Marx 1981, 959). By limiting the amount of surplus labor which the capitalist can extract from the worker, the worker frees some of their time for their own

good life, hence why social and industrial labor serves as a foundation; (3) the problem is not with industrial labor itself, but the fact that capitalism demands an excessive amount and intensity of such work under unnecessary grueling conditions. I will discuss this issue in more detail in my conclusion. Sean Sayers provides a compelling solution to the issues raised by this passage in his *Marxism and Human Nature* (Sayers, 61-67) that draws on versions of these three arguments. I would add the point that various kinds of work can be more or less edifying regardless of how “necessary” they are, and that for Marx humanity ought to minimize those least edifying and most tedious forms of labor.

¹⁹² Kautsky, 148-158

ends. The progressive reduction of the working day claws back ever more of the worker's time from the capitalist. These passages go beyond the mere analysis of capitalism and its emergence, function and decay, and instead suggest a more humane, less exploitative and less alienated society.¹⁹³ They contrast the descriptive content of *Capital* and the instrumental reasoning of capitalism to the future that *ought to be* considering what is best for human life and is an end-in-itself. Bloch characterizes these passages from *Capital* as outlining a "concrete utopia"¹⁹⁴ which unites enthusiasm for a possible future with a dialectical analysis of existing conditions, to contrast with the "abstract utopia" of the earlier utopian socialists which Marx and Engels criticize.¹⁹⁵ The "concrete utopia" functions as a standard by which to judge our own society, and determine what steps are necessary to humanize our economic system. When he describes the "true realm of freedom" for instance, Marx argues that human flourishing is realized in a society where the development of the individual is the common end of social labor, instead of the commodification of the individual. Marx then advocates for a norm that limits the working day. The justification for this norm is that it negates a universal impediment to

¹⁹³ The ethics of freedom in Marx will go on to influence the thinking of figures as varied as Karl Kautsky, Raya Dunayevskaya, and George Brenkert. Notably, the second two thinkers develop a theory of Marx's ethics centered entirely around the concept of freedom!

¹⁹⁴ Bloch's reading is counterintuitive as Marx and Engels critiqued the utopian socialists like Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. However, Bloch argues that utopian ideals play a normative function in revolutionary thinking, including Marx's, as a contrast to the misery of current conditions (Bloch, 1357). They are not blueprints to be realized in our own society by experts as the utopian socialists thought, but as standards of a truly human condition with which we can judge our society. As an example, Bloch gives the passage cited from the third volume of *Capital* (Bloch, 1359). The judgements about our conditions lead to concrete demands when viewed alongside Marx's critique of existing conditions and his immanent critique of the capitalist economy (Bloch, 620-621). Consequently, "utopia" has a function for Marxist theory and practice by orienting the critique of capitalism towards a positive alternative, instead of merely adopting a pessimistic attitude towards social circumstance.

¹⁹⁵ Bloch, 622

flourishing as shown by his critique of the capitalist working day. As Bloch argues, these utopian ideals foster hope as an antidote to resignation at the misery of current conditions.

Conclusion

Capital is not devoid of ethical concerns. As we saw last chapter, the theory of human nature in the book follows the contours of his *1844 Manuscripts*, though Marx no longer uses the Feuerbachian term “Species-Being”. This theory of human nature retains an Aristotelian element in identifying what is good for a thing through its function. The function of human beings is to work for the general good within the productive limits of our society. This function still suffers from alienation due to reified systems of control which emerge historically. Now, we see the development of bourgeois and proletarian standpoints that are based on the development of actual class consciousness. Marx looks at the history of these two classes, the lives of real individuals and the words of their theorists and apologists. Through the dialectical approach of describing the real conditions of these classes alongside the developments of their material conditions, self-consciousness and political demands, Marx can identify their authentic interests. In the case of the bourgeoisie, we see the belief that the working day must be as long as possible to ensure maximal productivity and discipline of the working class. In the case of the proletariat, we see the development of the movement to limit the working day and collectively protect free time for individual enjoyment and development. Marx does not hide which standpoint he endorses. Marx expects a proletarian reader to sympathize with Mary Anne Walkley, not the textile factory owners or the ladies at the ball wearing the dresses she made. The source of the sympathy is not

the consequence of mere partisanship for one's own class, but the philosophical anthropology found in the Manuscripts with its attendant notions of the good life that has been denied to the working class. This stands in contrast to the reading of Tucker, Wood and Althusser, who present Marx as a strictly theoretical storyteller who strips his partisanship for the worker from his philosophy in favor of rigor and objectivity and dismisses morality as merely an instrument of hegemony or dimension of ideology.

Chapter 5: The Meta-ethics of Marx and Engels

... A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time which has passed away since civilization is but a fragment of the past duration of man's existence; and but a fragment of the ages yet to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence, and knowledge are steadily tending. *It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes* (Morgan as quoted by Engels, 1972, 216-217)

Real human morality, superior to class morality and its traditions, will not be possible until a stage in human history has been reached in which class antagonisms have not only been overcome but have been forgotten as regards the conduct of life. (Engels, 103)

'I have been in error all this time,' replied Don Quixote, 'for I truly believed it was a castle, and not a bad one at that; but since it turns out not to be a castle but an inn, the best procedure now will be for you to forgive me for not paying you, because I cannot contravene the order of knights errant, of whom I know for certain (never having read anything to the contrary) that they did not pay for their lodging or anything else at any inn where they stayed, because whatever hospitality they might receive is due to them as a right and a privilege, in recompense for the insufferable travails they undergo searching for adventures by night and day, in winter and in summer, on foot and on horseback, thirsty and hungry, in the heat and in the cold, subject to all the inclemencies of the heavens and the discomforts of the earth' (Cervantes, 469)

This chapter will show how Marx and Engels make positive meta-ethical claims in their later writings such as the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, and a handful of passages from other texts. These passages reveal that Marx and Engels did make normative claims, but also gives clues as to why they never provided a full ethical theory. In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels describes how morality in class society is relative to the material conditions in which specific classes find themselves and the way in which that class relates to its world. An *ethos* is simply a way in which members of a class expect themselves and others to live based on their understanding of and place within society. The relative truth of a set of norms depends on how well their

class standpoint grasps the material conditions of their society and how well it addresses real grievances. When class morality aptly interprets reality and addresses problems, it functions as a progressive force and a potential guide for behavior, however class morality tends towards decadence as these problems are addressed and a ruling class faces obsolescence.

Marx and Engels hold that the proletarian moral standpoint is the most progressive moral standpoint as it best grasps the social conditions of their time. Engels does assert the existence of a universal morality which we can speak of only abstractly within class society but can be fully manifested once class itself is negated. Therefore, the proletarian goal of abolishing class itself is the prerequisite for achieving universal morality in its totality. Class-conscious proletarian morality demands limitations on the working day which balance the need to produce enough for everyone with the universal need for rest and free time, alongside other goals. I argue that the meta-ethical view of Marx and Engels is a reconciliation between moral realism and class relativism which ends with the achievement of universal morality upon the annihilation of class.

Section 1 summarizes the meta-ethics in Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and the theory of class relativism found in these texts. Section 1.1 will review Engels's critique of transcendent moral principles in his critique of Dühring, and his own historically contextualized ethics, and 1.4 will show how Engels historicizes the value of equality. Section 2 will address several potential issues with class relativism. 2.1 will argue that this relativism is not a subjective relativism but an objective one; 2.2 will deal with the tension between historicism and essentialism and the debate over whether Marx and Engels believed in a universal

notion of human nature; 2.3 will address the extent to which class relativism assumes a linear progressive notion of history; and 2.4 will look at the evolution of sexual morality in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* to see whether Engels's notion can justify universal moral notions outside of economics. Section 3 will show how Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" is best interpreted through the class relativism and evolutionary morality found in *Anti-Dühring*. Section 4.1 deals with Marx's account of evolving proletarian norms in the critique and section 4.2 shows how for Marx, the proletariat must gain collective agency as a class to assert and develop their own moral standpoint. Finally, section 5 will show how Marx ironizes the bourgeois standpoint on morality, which shows not only the degeneracy of bourgeois morality but the fact that it was corrupt from its very origins.

Dühring and *Anti-Dühring* – Engels on ethics

Engels, Marx's wealthy benefactor and right-hand man, was a theorist and philosopher in his own right. He helped Marx edit his works, especially the posthumously published second two volumes of *Capital*, co-authored a number of texts with Marx (most famously the *Communist Manifesto*), and wrote a number of theoretical works of his own. One work which he penned was a response to the German philosopher, positivist, newly minted socialist and vociferous critic of Marx, Eugen Dühring. Dühring joined the German Social Democrat Party and began arguing against Marxist theory and in favor of his own model of socialism. Returning to the polemical tone of their early works like *The German Ideology*, Engels levelled harsh critiques against Dühring and his philosophy. In the course of refuting Dühring's thinking, Engels had to make explicit many aspects of Marx's philosophy like the ontology, ethics and

epistemology that had laid implicit in much of their work. Of course, these are the words of Engels and not Marx. In his *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Kwasi Wiredu argued that Engels, unlike Marx, did have an ethics because of Engels's critique of Dühring.¹⁹⁶ Cornel West, who reads Marx as a "radical historicist", also reads *Anti-Dühring* as giving Engels's distinct view. Yet we know Marx collaborated with Engels on the work and encouraged its printing, so it is reasonable to infer that Engels and Marx shared this view.¹⁹⁷ Though West is correct that Engels was his own thinker, Engels's account coincides with Marx's analysis of the struggle to shorten the working day. Even West quotes Engels referring to himself and Marx as "We," suggesting Engels at least understood this text to reflect their shared views, and Marx as collaborator didn't correct him.¹⁹⁸

Engels's rejection of transcendent morality

Engels's work outlines a meta-ethical view where morality is relative to the objective conditions of a class. Engels affirms the possibility of a universal ethics while denying the possibility of an *a priori* or transcendent ethics.¹⁹⁹ Dühring's fundamental

¹⁹⁶ Wiredu, 79

¹⁹⁷ "I must call attention to the fact, by the way, that the views set out were, for by far the most part, developed and established by Marx, and only to a very slight degree by myself, so that it is understood that I have not represented them without his knowledge. I read the entire manuscript to him before sending it to press and the tenth chapter of the section on Political Economy was written by Marx and unfortunately had to be somewhat abbreviated by me. It was our wont to mutually assist each other in special branches of work. (Engels, 18)"

¹⁹⁸ The reason West rejects him this way is

¹⁹⁹ To a large extent, this is a consequence of how Marx and Engels have a proto-sociological understanding of morality. Steven Turner details the tensions between *a priori* notions of normativity and the sociological account of how normative systems develop and change through the travails of the German legal theorist Kelsen, who attempted to ground legal normativity on a *Grundnorm* to distinguish between legal systems he understood as legitimate and those he took to be illegitimate, such as the Bolshevik government (Turner, 77-82). The problem is that the transcendental notion of normativity in practice depends on mundane facts of the matter such as recognition by really-existing courts and the fact that real people believe them. Eventually, in

error is his attempt to rest his ethics in transcendent absolutes. As Engels characterizes Dühring's ethics:

Moral principles are beyond history and the national distinctions of today. The various truths from which, in the course of development, the fuller moral consciousness, and, so to speak, conscience itself is derived, can, as far as their origin is investigated, claim a similar acceptance and extent to that of mathematics and its applications. Real truths are immutable and it is folly to conceive of correct knowledge as liable to the attacks of time or of change in material conditions. (Engels, 93)

Engels rejects the notion of an absolute system in ethics not by rejecting the truth of ethical claims but by rejecting all ahistorical systems of thought. Dühring is a product of his history but is writing as if he was standing at the end of time:

If mankind only operated with eternal truths and with thought which possessed a sovereign significance and unlimited claims to truth, mankind would have arrived at a point where the eternity of thought becomes realized in actuality and possibility. Thus the famous miracle of the enumerated innumerable would be realized. (Engels, 95)

Engels objects to the notion that ethics is a simple set of principles derived from universal abstract axioms, as if that were the case, ethical disputes would be as rare as disputes over basic arithmetic. Engels goes on to give a historicized conception of truth where all truth claims, even self-evident ones, are situated within a social context that alters their meaning or significance. Of course there are claims which are universally true, but Engels argues that these truths will be either general abstractions or specific empirical facts which don't speak to the human condition:

He who therefore is after final truths of last instance, pure and immutable, will only manage to catch flat phrases and the most arrant commonplaces, like these – man cannot, generally speaking, live without working; up to the

the face of empirically minded arguments from thinkers like Weber and Hägerström, Kelsen comes to the position that the *Grundnorm* is a useful fiction and not some transcendental principle (Turner, 89).

present, men have for the most part been divided into masters and servants; Napoleon died on May 5th, 1821, and things of that sort. (Engels 98)

These claims are not insignificant – Marx and Engels certainly viewed the first two claims as fundamental elements of their ontology and the death of Napoleon was certainly a historical event. However, in accordance with their dialectical method, they always situated these claims in their historical context. The fact that people need to work to live is only meaningful once it's been related to how work is organized or carried out across history. To understand the master-servant relationship, we must understand the various historical forms which this relationship can take and how these historical forms are moments of a greater totality.

Against historicized notions of ethics, Dühring argues that moral knowledge is as sound as mathematical knowledge. Engels argues that unlike mathematics, no moral view has demonstrated principles that are as universally accepted as those in arithmetic and geometry:

But someone may remark, “Good is still not evil and evil is not good; if good and evil are confused all morality is abolished, and each may do what he will.” When the rhetoric is stripped away this is the opinion of Herr Dühring. But the matter is not to be disposed of so easily. If things were as easy as that there would be no dispute about good and evil. How is that today, however? (Engels, 101)

The relative soundness of mathematical truths is seen in the ubiquity of their acceptance. Basic arithmetical facts, with some exceptions,²⁰⁰ are shared across many societies. Empirically, however, there is no such unanimity in morality. Not only do specific norms vary between populations but how these norms are understood and interpreted vary. Engels goes on to list the predominant ethical systems in Europe:

²⁰⁰ A famous exception is the Western resistance to the number zero prior to Fibonacci

“Feudal-Christian”, with its divisions into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, and with further subdivisions like Jesuit, etc.; the various “loosely drawn ethical systems” of the feudal era; the “modern or bourgeois” systems, such as deontological, contractarian and utilitarian moral theories; and finally, the nascent “proletarian future system of morality”.²⁰¹ For Engels, though some systems better grasp reality than others, there are no absolute and ahistorical axioms to ground their morality:

Which is the true one? No single one of them, regarded as a finality, but that system assuredly possesses the most elements of truth which promises the longest duration, which existent in the present is also involved in the revolution of the future, the proletarian. (Engels, 101)

None of these ethical systems can justify moral absolutes, but of these the proletarian ethos is most apt at grasping social conditions and human nature.

All ethical systems express the specific interests and concerns of a class, and this represents either a faction of the ruling class or of the dominated classes:

But if we now see that the three classes of modern society, the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletarian, have their distinctive ethical systems, we can only conclude therefrom that mankind consciously or unconsciously shapes its moral views in accordance with the material facts upon which the last instance of the class is based – upon the economic conditions under which production and exchange are carried on. (Engels, 101-102)

For example, Aristocratic morality connected virtue to title, privilege and pedigree as their system rested on relations of trust and family ties while bourgeois morality rejected the connection between virtue and privilege in favor of formal equality and merit. From the bourgeois standpoint, aristocratic ethics was arbitrary in associating virtue with distinctions that had nothing to do with good character or its cultivation.

²⁰¹ Engels, 101

Title and hereditary privilege would transfer from legitimately virtuous nobles to offspring regardless of their character. Whatever significance these titles once had at the dawn of feudalism, they had long lost their meaning for the rising middle class. If they are not abandoned outright, traditional moral theories will be repurposed and reinterpreted by the new classes, the way Plato and Aristotle were later appropriated by Aristocrats, Capitalists and Socialists alike.

The morality of a particular class emerges out of the social structures, practices and experiences of a class. For instance, the liberal notion that free exchange emerges from the daily practices of the bourgeoisie. The truth of their morality depends on the degree to which it grasps actual material conditions. Sean Sayers connects this interpretation of morality to the general theory of history of Marx and Engels:

Different social forms, governed by different principles of justice, arise in different conditions and in different times, and are necessary and right for their specific conditions and times, and with time they also lose their necessity and rightness, as the conditions for a new social order develop. Principles of justice and right are social and historical phenomena (Sayers, 142)

The aristocracy valued their titles due to a symbiotic relationship between themselves and the peasants. The aristocrats were militarized landowners who protected those who worked the land from banditry and other threats in a time of chaos. Aristocratic and knightly notions of chivalry and honor were important ideological pillars of feudal society, but once the threats to the lives of the peasants subsided, the landed aristocracy became decadent and their morality no longer reflected their lives or the real social function of their class. The literary expression of this decadence is Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), where the eponymous Hidalgo and his "squire" Sancho Panza attempt

to live a chivalrous life after the epic period of the Reconquista had long passed.²⁰² The book was a satire of the mythic “knight errant” who would wander and quest to demonstrate his chivalric virtue. Though knights-errant are legendary figures, they nonetheless functioned as exemplary paragons of chivalric virtue. Chivalry was a classical feudal ethos which lost its foundation with the end of the medieval era. As suggested by Marx, Don Quixote made the error of “wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society” (Marx, 176 footnote 35). As argued by Ernst Bloch, Don Quixote holds on to an archaic chivalric utopianism that frames his perception of reality.²⁰³ Cervantes’s satire plays on this anachronism, for instance in the famous scene where Don Quixote confuses a windmill for a giant.²⁰⁴ The windmill is a piece of early capital, but Quixote instead interprets it as a fantastical threat. It is also seen in his tendency early in his sallies to interpret inns as manorial castles.²⁰⁵

This is not to say that Don Quixote’s virtue is entirely false, as he always aspires to act justly. In some cases, he really does act justly, as when he protects the beautiful shepherdess Marcela from her angry male pursuers.²⁰⁶ This is because Don Quixote’s moral framework, as anachronistic as it may be, is at times confronted with damsels

²⁰² William Childers shows how the decadence of the petty nobility in 16th century Spain, and the contrast between their later undisciplined and avaricious repression of the Moriscos contrasts with their earlier history, inspired Don Quixote’s satire. As explained by Childers: “Historical reality as the adventures of Cervantes’s ridiculous hero are from those of Amadis de Gaula. The War of the Alpujarras provided a historical travesty of chivalric values as absurd as Cervantes’s parody, though much less idealistic than the fantasies of his mad knight.” (Childers, “Don Quixote and the War of the Alpujarras: The Historical Debasement of Chivalry as a Correlative to Its Literary Parody”, 12)

²⁰³²⁰³ Bloch, 1038

²⁰⁴ Cervantes, Chapter VII

²⁰⁵ Cervantes, Chapters II, III, Chapters XV-XVIII

²⁰⁶ Cervantes, Ch XIV

who are actually in distress. So, the anachronism of a moral system is not sufficient to assume it's always wrong, but even when it takes the right choice in the face of a moral problem, it still rests on misinterpretation. Consequently, in his review of the Hungarian translation, Lukács notes that the novel is not a satire of enthusiasm but the ideals of a dying class:

The target of Cervantes' satire is not enthusiasm in general, but that of Don Quixote, an enthusiasm with a defined class content, and the satire is directed against this concrete content. Hence, the particular aspect of the whole world of this novel. The unenlightened reader will laugh at Don Quixote, at his ideology and his aims, but at the same time he experiences a profound sympathy with the moral purity of his enthusiasm.

The solution to the puzzle is to be found in the question of transition due to the formation of a new class society. (Lukács, 1951)

The modern reader is in on the joke as they no longer live in accordance with traditional aristocratic morality and understand it as decadent. Even the aristocrats in *Don Quixote* no longer believe in the chivalric norms – the Duke and Duchess exploit Don Quixote's chivalric innocence for their own amusement.²⁰⁷ These late feudal overlords view him instrumentally as a source of entertainment and easily manipulate him through simulation and pretense.

Cervantes's work was composed while aristocratic morality was still dominant, though it was on the decline. He could satirize its failings, but the alternative bourgeois morality would still take many generations to fully form. What made the bourgeois critique of aristocratic morality apt was that bourgeois morality of Early Modern and Enlightenment era Europe better grasped social conditions at that time, while aristocratic morality had descended into the decadence satirized by Cervantes. The value

²⁰⁷ Cervantes, Chapters XXX-LVIII

of merit accorded with the need for competent and efficient individuals to manage wealth, as well as the rise of a middle class which was educated and competent but not necessarily ennobled. The bourgeoisie, unlike the aristocracy, adopted a more austere and ascetic approach to personal wealth which they reinvested into productive capital. This led to progressive development which was impossible under the hegemony of the aristocracy. Moreover, the bourgeoisie demanded formal equality for all before the law to replace the arbitrary privileges which too frequently protected the corrupt. These were significant changes which eliminated real human suffering. That is not to say that bourgeois morality was not ridden with brutality, contradiction and hypocrisy from its outset, as will be explored later in this chapter. All class standpoints suffer fundamental flaws shaped by the historical origins and conditions of the class. Moreover, the progression of class morality is not entirely linear. We have seen how Don Quixote does at times act more justly than others, and many Marxists including Marx himself noted that pre-capitalist morality at times successfully critiques bourgeois social relations.²⁰⁸ It is simply to say that every class standpoint also at times identifies real problems that it solves successfully, even if those successes themselves create new contradictions and problems for the future to solve.

Marx, Engels, and the socialist movement of their time saw bourgeois morality becoming increasingly decadent while proletarian morality was still emerging. In the last chapter, we saw how the working class correctly identified the extension of the working day as a threat to their wellbeing. The bourgeoisie on the other hand wants to

²⁰⁸ For instance, in the last chapter we saw Marx cite the fact that even savages and colonialists can grasp how capitalism is irrational, and we've seen how Marx approvingly cites Aristotle's critique of Chrematistics.

“free” workers and capitalists as individuals to set the working day as they please, a social arrangement which favors the bourgeoisie. Fisk presents the tension between these two views:

The validity of principles for workers is determined by reference to the fact that their core persons are affected by their being members of a group that must sell their labour for someone else’s profit. Tendencies characteristic of persons of that group will validate principles that do not hold for owners. A case could be made for claiming that the worker has a perfect right to try to limit the length of the working day and the owner has a perfect right to try to lengthen it. The range of conflict between the two groups is not one over which there stands a set of ethical principles that both groups should recognize and that will resolve all conflicts between them. (Fisk, 37)

In the last chapter, we saw how this tension plays out, and described the interests underpinning these two conflicting notions of morality. The fundamental limitation on morality isn’t that it is merely ideological, but that different moral standpoints are never entirely commensurable on ethical grounds since there is no morality that is not influenced by its class standpoint.

One might respond by arguing that these various ethical systems all share some foundational claims and that these function as an “eternally stable system of ethics” (Engels, 102). To this, Engels replies that these are not eternal truths but merely the consequence of the fact that all of these systems share some historical contingencies. For instance, both feudalism and capitalism must prohibit theft. Hence the fact that different systems share values in common does not prove historically transcendent ethical ideals. Theft in a society “in which the motive for theft did not exist” would merely be the product of “weak-mindedness” making the prohibition of theft redundant (Engels, 102). In other words, morality as it has existed so far has been class morality and not a body of transcendent truths:

We state, on the contrary, that up to the present time all ethical theory is in the last instance a testimony to the existence of certain economic conditions prevailing in any community at any particular time. And in proportion as society developed class-antagonisms, morality became a class morality and either justified the interests and domination of the ruling class, or – as soon as a subject class became strong enough – justified revolt against the domination of the ruling class and the interests of the subject class. (Engels, 102)

Engels notes that “there is an advance made in morals as a whole, just as there is in all other branches of human knowledge” (Engels, 103), but morality has yet to escape the bonds of class. This seems to suggest a trans-historical value on Engels’s part, however a more internally consistent reading is that the new values are more advanced as their class standpoint better grasps the real needs and capacities of living humans. Though bourgeois and proletarian morality are incommensurate, Marx and Engels think that the proletariat comes to understand bourgeois morality and value better than the bourgeoisie itself much as the bourgeois Cervantes understood feudal morality better than the aristocrats. Though the proletariat can evaluate and critique bourgeois morality better than the bourgeoisie, this does not mean that they can use ethical argumentation to convince one with a bourgeois moral standpoint. The best hope for a member of the ruling class is that they recognize the degeneracy of their own *ethos*. Experience of the decadence of one’s own morality can free the bourgeois individual from bourgeois morality, the way Don Quixote’s travails disabuse him of his uncritical faith in the aristocratic morality of the knight-errant.

Class morality does not necessarily entail one class devaluing the humanity of individuals from another class. Consequently, proletarian morality should not be understood as a kind of destructive or nihilistic *ressentiment* towards the rich. Though aristocrats certainly took a chauvinistic stance to other classes, the bourgeoisie at least

tends to extend their own universal morality to the proletariat, albeit in a manner that privileges their own interests. The proletariat on the other hand locates its interest in the elimination of the class structure itself, not in ruthlessness towards or instrumentalization of individuals from other classes. Notably, in his 1843 text *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels argues that a class-conscious proletariat would not engage in violence against other classes as an end in itself, but only engage in violence insofar as it is necessary to emancipate themselves. He does argue that a proletariat lacking in class consciousness would lash out in anger and destroy their class enemies, but this problem is solved through the development of class consciousness:

The revolution must come; it is already too late to bring about a peaceful solution; but it can be made more gentle than prophesied in the foregoing pages. This depends, however, more upon the development of the proletariat than upon that of the bourgeoisie. In proportion as the proletariat absorbs socialistic and communistic elements, will the revolution diminish in bloodshed, revenge, and savagery. Communism stands, in principle, above the breach between bourgeoisie and proletariat, recognizes only its historic significance for the present, but not its justification for the future: wishes, indeed, to bridge over the chasm, to do away with all class antagonisms. Hence it recognizes as justified, so long as the struggle exists, the exasperation of the proletariat towards its oppressors as a necessity, as the most important lever for a labour movement just beginning; but it goes beyond this exasperation, because communism is a question of humanity and not of the workers alone. (Engels, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, 292)

Engels goes on to note that this is because the fundamental cause of the problem is not the failure of individual morality but the contradictions of social systems. Consequently, the violence of the revolution is inversely proportional to the development of proletarian class morality and wanton revolutionary violence is a symptom of an underdeveloped proletarian morality.

A potential morality devoid of class antagonism is mentioned both in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* and *Anti-Dühring*. This universal morality is not bound by the limitations inherent in a class standpoint and represents an advance on proletarian morality:

Real human morality, superior to class morality and its traditions, will not be possible until a stage in human history has been reached in which class antagonisms have not only been overcome but have been forgotten as regards the conduct of life. (Engels, 103)

With the abolition of class comes the abolition of class morality and the generation of universal morality. Notably, these morals are universal but not absolute or *a priori* – they are universally true but are only obtained within a sufficiently developed society. Dühring's error, Engels argues, is in confusing the future universal morality accessible to a classless society with a transcendental morality that can be revealed in its totality at any time through reason alone.

Equality

The concept of class relativism is explicated further in Engels's critique of Dühring's conception of equality. Dühring's transcendental ethics follows from a concept of abstract human equality. Engels thinks such an abstraction is impossible, and always smuggles the theorist's own material relations and class biases into the abstraction. Dühring's transcendental account of equality begins from an *a priori* method which starts with two subjects who are axiomatically equal:

That two human wills or two human beings are just alike is not only no axiom, it is a glaring exaggeration. In the first place two human beings may differ as regards sex, and this simple fact shows us, if we look at childhood for a moment, that the elements of society are not two men, but a little man and a little woman which constitute a family, the simplest and earliest form of association for productive purposes. (Engels, 105)

As we've seen from the theory of the division of labor in Marx and Engels, society is at heart a set of relations between individuals with unique experiences, skills, and capacities. Dühring's definition of society abstracts from individuals to derive a notion of *a priori* "socialist" equality. He was not the first person to appeal to thought experiments involving simplified, primordial people, but whereas earlier thinkers like Rousseau or Hegel used this as a means of illustration Dühring treats it as a "scientific" method.²⁰⁹ Any abstract notion of equality must either apply to everyone but be so vague as to be philosophically empty, or be more specific and therefore meaningful but at the expense of excluding a large number of people. Engels argues that Dühring takes the second option. In doing so, Dühring extrapolates from his own views, experiences and class biases and smuggles these into his abstractions.

Ethics, for Marx and Engels, emerges from and governs real social relations.

Dühring is inventing an abstract social relation by stripping away all the qualities that make humans real individuals, instead of considering human beings as they are:

In order to create the fundamental axiom, the two men and their wills are mutually equal and neither has any right to lord it over the other. We cannot find two suitable men. They must be two men who are so free from all national, economic, political and religious conditions, from sex and personal peculiarities that nothing remains of either of them but the mere concept of "man" and then they are entirely equal. They are therefore two fully-equipped ghosts conjured up by that very Herr Dühring' who particularly ridicules and denounces "spiritistic" movements. These two phantoms must of course do all that their wizard wants of them and so their united productions are a matter of complete indifference to the rest of the world. (Engels, 106)

The social relation between two individuals is always framed by their material differences:

²⁰⁹ Engels, 106

Their wills are, theoretically speaking, entirely equal and this is acknowledged by both. But in reality the inequality is tremendous. A. is resolute and energetic, B. inert, irresolute and slack. A. is sharp, B. is stupid. How long will it be before A. imposes his will on B., first by taking the upper hand, and keeping it habitually, under the pretense that B.'s submission is voluntary? Whether the form of voluntariness continues or force is resorted to slavery is still slavery. (Engels, 107)

In other words, the ideal of universal equality between two individuals is a vicious abstraction which conceals the relations which exist between real individuals. To explain real world inequality through his abstract and formal understanding of humanity and ethics, Dühring dehumanizes those who are not fully “human” according to his standard by explaining inequality as the consequence of some humans having a share of “animal characteristics.”²¹⁰ Dühring’s explanation of inequality between civilization and animal nature is a post-hoc justification that tacitly admits the real human differences that make axiomatic notions of equality ideological.

The cruelty justified by this dehumanization is exposed by analogy to the Russian sack of Central Asian Tatars by General Kaufman. Dühring argues that civilized society must ultimately use force upon the uncivilized as it does upon “children and incapables” as their barbarity prevents them from recognizing reason. The violence so-called “savages” are subjected to is a consequence of their own barbarity, or so says the ideology of the civilizer.²¹¹ This “moral” principle ironically licenses the “civilized” party to brutalize the “savage” (Engels is notably foreshadowing Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* here):

²¹⁰ Engels, 108

²¹¹ One might draw reference to Marx’s writings on colonization to blame him for the same thing, however this would be unfair. For instance, for Marx, the colonization of India was a tragic historical inevitability due to the political and social circumstances of early 19th century India and the competitive rapaciousness of European colonial powers, but also brought with it the grounds for Indians to assert their sovereignty in the future.

Thus, not only moral but spiritual inequality is sufficiently potent to do away with the “full equality” of two wills and to furnish an ethical rule by which all the shameful acts of civilized plundering states against backward peoples down to the atrocities of the Russians in Turkestan may be justified. When General Kaufmann, in the summer of 1873, fell upon the Tartar tribes of the Jomuden, burnt their tents, mowed down their wives and families, as the command ran, he explained that the destruction was due to the perversity, the inimical minds of the people of the Jomuden, and was employed for the purpose of bringing them back into the social order, and the means used by him had been the most efficient. (Engels, 109-110)

Ironically then, Dühring’s rules-based ethics built around abstract equality legitimizes brutality against those who do not recognize the rationality of the system, or which do not fit its standards of “reason” and “humanity”. This inevitably leads to treating the “savage” as a mere means to achieve a “civilized” world:

But he who wills the end wills also the means. But he [Kaufman] was not so cruel as to insult the Jomuden people in addition and to say he massacred them in the name of equality, that he considered their wills equal to his own. And again in this conflict, the select, those who pose as champions of truth and science, the realist philosophers in the last instance must be able to distinguish superstition, prejudice, barbarism, evil tendencies of character, and when force and subjection are necessary to bring about equality. So that equality now means equalization by means of force, and the will of one recognizes the will of the other as equal by overthrowing it. (Engels, 110)

Engels is noting that in such an abstract ethics, the ends pursued conceal the real ethical content. The core contradiction in Dühring’s view is that equality must be imposed by one party on another party, which is an intrinsically unequal relation.

Engels has not given up on the value of equality, however. He merely objects to the form which both bourgeois apologists and Dühring have given it. He notes that some concept of equality has existed in some form across history, but this notion has changed drastically over time up until the modern conception of universal citizenship. Ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of equality were minimalist, and with embedded distinctions like slave/freeman or Greek/Barbarian. Christianity contained a universal

conception of humanity centered around the ubiquity of sin and openness to salvation, but this notion of equality developed into new forms of feudal inequality like the distinctions between the priesthood and laity or the distinction between noble and peasant. Finally, it was the bourgeois class which emerged within feudalism and struggled with the priests, princes and guilds for abstract equality.²¹² The bourgeois notion of equality centered on a collection of universal rights. As it abstracted from the real material relations which inhibited the working class, this notion of universal equality was fundamentally stamped with the limitations of bourgeois imagination and class interest at the time:

But as regards the special bourgeois character of these human rights, it is significant that the American Constitution which was the first to recognise these rights of man in the same breath established slavery among the colored people: class privileges were cursed, race privileges were blessed. (Engels 114).

Bourgeois morality asserts universal equality while justifying the existence of other classes upon which the bourgeoisie can depend, and it achieves this with an ahistorical philosophical anthropology. It is in practice universal equality only for those with property and status.

Proletarian morality is different, Engels contends, in its two possible forms. One form is as a critique from an external standpoint, where the other is an immanent critique from within bourgeois morality itself. In the first case:

[Proletarian morality is a] natural reaction against social inequalities which were obvious, against the contrast between rich and poor, masters and slaves, luxurious and hungry, and as such it is simply an expression of revolutionary instinct finding its justification in that fact and in that fact alone. (Engels, 115)

²¹² Engels, 110-113

In this respect proletarian morality is justified by the social conditions, but rests on premises which are not necessarily justified by the bourgeois order of things. This is an external critique of bourgeois class relations that the working class can share with peasants, slaves, and others. Second, the proletariat “take the bourgeois at their word” and demand equality “not merely in the sphere of government but actually in the sphere of society and economics” (Engels, 115). These principles are seen by the proletariat not as ahistorical and axiomatic ideals but as living notions that can be further developed and taken to their logical conclusions:

... [The Proletarian demand for equality] may arise from reaction against the bourgeois claims of equality from which it deduces more or less just and far reaching claims, serves as a means of agitation to stir the workers, by means of a cry adopted by the capitalists themselves, against the capitalists, and in this case stands or falls with bourgeois equality itself. (Engels, 115)

In the second formulation, proletarian morality is not a rejection of bourgeois morality but instead its full realization through a process of immanent critique as the internal contradictions of bourgeois thought are exposed.²¹³ We saw this formulation in the last chapter when the proletariat comes to argue that market exchange between the “equal” parties of employers and workers an unequal exchange characterized by coercion and hypocrisy. The good according to both conceptions of proletarian morality culminates with the abolition of class itself. One thing that distinguishes proletarian morality from all other class moralities is that it seeks its own abolition. Aristocratic and bourgeois ideas of equality are both limited by their need for self-preservation in spite of their

²¹³ Buchanan gives a good account of this when he points out how capitalism fails to meet its own standards of justice in his critique of Wood’s reading of Marx (*Marx, Analyzed*, 269)

universalist pretense. The proletariat is best served by its own destruction as a class and the abolition of class inequality. This is the real basis for true universal equality.

Nonetheless, proletarian morality is as much a historical product as bourgeois and aristocratic moralities before it. Insofar as either proletarian or bourgeois morality are universal, it is because the enlightenment has undermined popular parochial prejudice:

So the notion of equality, in its proletarian as well as in its bourgeois form, is itself a historical product. Certain circumstances were required to produce it and these in their turn proceeded from a long anterior history. It is therefore anything but an eternal truth. And if the public regards it as self-evident in one sense or another, if it, as Marx remarks, “already occupies the position of a popular prejudice” it is not due to its being an axiomatic truth but to the universal broadening of conception in accordance with the spirit of the eighteenth century. (Engels, 115)

We see that bourgeois ethics is an advance on aristocratic ethics in better approximating universal human needs. Where aristocratic ethics is embedded in mythical attachments to the nobility and divinely ordained privileges, bourgeois equality is a real advance by stripping away these arbitrary inequalities. Where bourgeois ethics goes wrong is in taking these contextual historical advances and presuming that they are the achievement of transcendent and eternal principles instead of historically situated responses to material conditions. Proletarian morality in turn is no less historical than bourgeois ethics but represents a further advance which gets even closer to universal morality.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ One might think that this system of norms, as implemented by a classless society, would be the same as those implemented by the similarly classless primitive communism. However, for Marx the development of agriculture, the state and modern industry through alienation and exploitation has also developed the human subject in a radically new way. For instance, Engels notes that primitive human societies engage in high levels of incest simply due to the limited size

Potential problems for class relativism

In this section, I will discuss potential problems for this account of class relativism. First, I will address whether class relativism constitutes a form of subjectivism that deflates morality to custom or arbitrary individual preference. Second, I will address how class relativism, which historicizes ethics, is compatible with the normative theory of flourishing which rests on an intrinsic notion of the good. Third, I will address how the evolution of morality is not a linear progression. Finally, I will consider if the notions of class morality and flourishing given by Marx and Engels can justify norms that don't address labor.

Class relativism, objectivity, and moral realism

One potential worry is whether Engels's ethics has the problems usually associated with subjective or cultural relativism or a rejection of moral realism, namely that different moral justifications cannot be evaluated against one another. For Wood, the relativism of Marx and Engels is a part of their rejection of moral realism.

Conversely, Gilbert and Nielsen both argue that Marx and Engels are moral realists and not moral relativists as they do hold that some moral judgements are valid.²¹⁵ Both argue that because Marx and Engels ground their ethical judgements as well as their political aspirations on a eudaimonistic theory of value and normativity, they couldn't

of the community and the structure of the ancient *gens* (Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Chapter 2). Later, echoing Marx and Engels, the anarchist biologist Kropotkin noted how primitive human communities often engage in infanticide and parricide due to the limited technical capacity to deal with harsh environmental constraints (Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, Chapter 3). These are not signs of the intrinsic immorality or barbarity of such peoples, who as Kropotkin notes mourn the lives of slain infants and elders. It is merely a reflection of the harshness of their conditions. Moreover, in his private correspondence, Engels suggests that the primitive communism of many Indonesian communities facilitated their robbery by the Dutch colonists (Engels, 1975)

²¹⁵ (Gilbert, 1982) (Nielsen, 1980) (Nielsen, 1983)

possibly understand morality itself to be relative. For Nielsen, Engels is merely rejecting moral rationalism or the belief that we can use reason to determine morality in an *a priori* manner. Nielsen and Gilbert are certainly correct that Marx and Engels took the idea of human flourishing to be a universal good as well as the justification for their belief that there has been moral progress. We have also seen Engels grant validity to the general state of indignation towards exploitation and inequality expressed by all classes.²¹⁶ It is important to remember Marx's argument in the *1844 Manuscripts* that the nature of all things is relative to other things. A part of the sun's nature is to give light to plants, but this is only true insofar as there are plants upon which the sun shines. Morality is relative insofar as it is grounded on a human nature that is modified by humanity itself.²¹⁷ Yet morality is still real and objective insofar as the norms are justified or undermined by the flourishing or immiseration of real humans.

Though Engels's argument is relativist, *it is not relative to the subject or their culture but to objective conditions*. Consequently, Fisk argues this relativism is not subjectivist or anti-realist, as morality is relative to an objective category of class and class relations:

When Einstein set physics on a footing of relativity, he did not make physics a 'subjective' science that deals with our consciousness rather than with the world independent of us ... Similarly, relativity in ethics does not make ethics subjective. Ethical claims are relative to groups. They are not relative to what we *think* our group's interests are. (Fisk, 38)

This is broadly consistent with Lukács's notion of imputed class consciousness, or consciousness of real objective conditions, and empirical class consciousness or what

²¹⁶ Nielsen himself cites this passage (1983, 244)

²¹⁷ Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and Beauvoir's *Second Sex* extend these themes to race and gender respectively

subjects within the class believe. Workers who take the bourgeois standpoint out of false consciousness or capitalists like Engels who endorses the proletarian standpoint out of humanitarian solidarity are not instances of proletarian or bourgeois moral standpoints respectively. Exemplars of bourgeois class morality might be the works of a theorist who accepts the core values of the bourgeois way of life like Bentham,²¹⁸ or the implicit values contained in everyday bourgeois practice at some time and place like those of the early 19th century English bourgeoisie.²¹⁹ These speak to the actual *ethos* of the class in question, and how this *ethos* is shaped by the conditions of this class.

There are some moral beliefs such as the prohibition on murder which are universal. Fisk argues that there are norms shared between class moralities, but claims that these shared ethical principles necessarily have different justifications:

There will indeed be some ethical principles shared by opposing groups. The justification for a shared principle will, though, not go beyond groups. The shared principle will be justified relative to either group by the tendencies of people in that group. (Fisk, 37)

It is true that in many cases the justifications for a particular norm will be different between classes, in other cases one class might appropriate the rationalization of other classes. Marx and Engels do argue that class moralities are incommensurable, but they never argue that they are *wholly* incommensurable. Instead, for Marx and Engels class moralities have a dialectical relationship, as different class moralities react to one

²¹⁸ An interesting case is in Bentham's *A Defense of Usury*, where he gives a liberal defense of the practice. His own analysis provides an interesting contrast with that of Aristotle's critique of Chrematistics

²¹⁹ There are other ways of cutting up the various moral systems within capitalist society. Bolívar Echeverría gives an intriguing alternative formulation in his idea of Historical *Ethos*, which returns to Hegel's idea of *Sittlichkeit* and brings in Max Weber to identify a broader set of institutions, practices, norms and habits which sustain the current economic system (*Critical Marxism in Mexico*, chapters 14 and 15)

another and adopt the values of other classes for their own purposes. As we saw, working class morality at times asserts its own distinct norms, but also repurposes bourgeois norms for their own purposes. In a certain sense, Marx and Engels actually think that working class morality will fully realize bourgeois norms and values such as universal equality more deeply than the morality of the market.²²⁰ To overcome liberalism dialectically for Marx and Engels means a sublation of liberalism, not its negation, which is to say a deeper realization of the values of liberalism than is possible within liberalism itself.

We need to keep in mind that for Marx human beings change and develop human nature through their activity. Engels does think that there are universal moral truths, as we saw, but there are few of these. This is because there are some things about human nature which remain more or less constant, while other aspects can change in more or less profound ways. Consequently, there are some norms which will hold for any class standpoint in any means of production, akin to the larger group-moralities of Fisk. To put it one way, they are relative to a constant. Second, there are other norms and rules which emerge within class societies out of the social functions and relations of specific classes. The morals which emerge out of these social conditions are real not only in a sociological sense that a culture really holds these norms but in the sense that the people living in these societies have good reasons to think they will realize human flourishing. However, the horizons within which these morals are derived are constrained by the standpoint of the class. Insofar as any system of production entails having multiple

²²⁰ This point is made, among other places, by Igor Shoikhedbrod (*Revisiting Marx's critique of liberalism: Rethinking justice, legality and rights*, 207-214) and by thinkers at the Platypus Affiliated Society ("Marxism and Liberalism", Heartfield et al.)

classes, society will inevitably have two or more conflicting moral systems. The moral views of members of a class will be closer to or further from this class morality depending on their level of class consciousness. This explains the internal struggles between members of the same class, for instance between slave-owning and abolitionist capitalists. Moreover, aside from the conflict between classes, all class moralities contain internal contradictions. A class morality becomes ideological in the pejorative sense of the term when its external conflicts and internal contradictions fester and increasingly inhibit flourishing, and a class morality is progressive insofar as it correctly diagnoses these problems. A member of the ruling class might either deny the problem, acknowledge it as a problem but only one whose harms can be minimized through reform, or in some cases abandon their own class standpoint for that of another.

Engels's reconciliation between relativism and realism is seen in his treatment of ancient slavery. Dühring dismisses Hellenic society as fundamentally immoral because of its slavery.²²¹ For Engels, we know today that slavery is wrong and harmful, however we need to understand why people in ancient Greece understood it to be good within their own framework. The immorality of the ancient Greeks is not a sufficient explanation. Instead, Engels argues, we need to understand why Greek citizens largely understood the institution to be not only natural but good in spite of the problems inherent in the institution. Only when we understand the objective conditions under which slavery emerged can we understand the moral standpoint of the slave-owning aristocracy. The historical materialist who endorses proletarian morality can condemn slavery as universally bad but also grasps that those who practiced it historically were

²²¹ Engels, 172

not doing it because they were bad people or had a false morality. It can also explain how the inability of the slave system to resolve its contradictions did lead over time to its eventual abolition. This view is largely a materialist recapitulation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic,²²² as primitive man emerges from a struggle to the death through slavery, and it is only through the experience of slavery that its harms on both slave and master are understood.²²³ The current bourgeois and proletarian critiques of slavery are justified, and their conclusions are real moral knowledge and not mere ideology, but these critiques are empty without the proper historical contextualization of slavery. We can also see a similar argument in Engels's treatment of early incest in the *gens* and the later development of the incest taboo.²²⁴ Engels argues that the incest taboo was an invention and that it is unambiguously good that people recognize the harm of incest today, but in the ancient *gens* there was no meaningful way to avoid incest due to the promiscuous family structure and the small size of society.²²⁵ It's not that the reasons why incest was bad did not exist prior to moral rules against it, but that individuals in early societies neither had a basis to recognize those ills nor pose an alternative. It is only later as family structures developed and communities grew large enough for people

²²² Susan Buck-Morss gives an interesting account of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic through the Haitian revolution and the impact which the self-emancipation of slaves in Haiti had on his thought.

²²³ The Saint-Simonians, another significant influence on Marx and Engels, also argued that in spite of its brutality, slavery was a means of preserving the life of the vanquished in societies otherwise marked by cannibalism and genocidal extermination, and therefore represents a first step away from savagery (*The Doctrine of Saint-Simon*, translated by Iggers, 1972, 73)

²²⁴ Engels, 1972 65-66

²²⁵ The account of Marx and Engels has some similarity with the Aristotelian Constructionist approach described by Mark Lebar in his paper "Aristotelian Constructivism", where he argues that practical reason constructs morality to realize human flourishing and we can objectively evaluate morality in terms of its ability to achieve this goal.

to find mates outside the *gens* that the harms of incest could be recognized and the act understood as wrong.

Reconciling historicism and human flourishing

The historicist relativism of Engels's approach is largely consistent with Marx's writing, though it does seem at odds with some of Marx's words. We saw last chapter how Marx thinks labor ought to be done "with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature" (Marx 1981, 959). This seems to assume an essentialist and teleological notion of human nature. In the second chapter, we saw Geras defend such an idea of human nature in Marx, and Nussbaum argue that it is essential to virtue theory. The argument is that without such a common human essence, no notion of humanistic flourishing is coherent, and it cannot form a unifying ethical goal or norm for the proletariat let alone humanity. Against thinkers like Nussbaum and Geras, Sayers and Fisk try to reconcile a historicist notion of human nature with the universality of alienation and flourishing. For Fisk, human beings always share some natural traits like a need for water, however human nature also comes to incorporate new needs. As human nature is a totality of all needs and capacities and not just those which remain constant, human nature varies between individuals and across history. Sayers asserts that there is a universal human nature, but universality does not entail the metaphysically loaded notion of essence but simply contingencies that happen to be ubiquitous to humans. On the other extreme, Althusser uses Marx's opposition to essentialism to reject all forms of Marxist humanism and moral philosophy as ideological.

As we saw in chapter 2, instead of a strong historicist denial of essentialism like Althusser or a classical notion of humanism based on a fixed essence, Marx offers a dialectical humanism where the needs and capacities that define our nature are constantly growing and developing historically. This fits with Marx's description of the good life, where a human is "rich in needs" that are created and met socially. Thus, both the *ergon* and the *telos* that underpin an ethics of flourishing are the products of human labor. A person "rich in needs" is not one confined to animal sustenance but one who has developed multifaceted needs through their own labor and the labor of others. In line with Marx's productivism, these needs include the productive need for satisfaction in doing good for others. Class morality is a consequence of the circumscription of human nature within class roles. The bourgeoisie is a distinct instantiation of human nature, and its morality reflects its dependence on capital with its *entelechy* of accumulation. The proletariat is another instantiation of human nature whose morality emerges from the activity of social work, and how class relations constrain the possibility of human development. Their different relationship to work, to other social classes and to themselves all create different soil with which to cultivate a moral system. This also helps to address a critique of Engels by Cornel West, who argues that Engels's ethical claims cannot be justified without either a "vicious circularity" ("socialism" is only morally preferable relative to the morality of a socialist society).²²⁶

The evolution of class morality

The notion of class relativism is in large part an evolutionary theory, as morality develops through history with changing material conditions. Marx and Engels avoided

²²⁶ West, 105-106

laying out roadmaps for the future unlike the Utopians, and only gave general descriptions of a post-revolutionary society. Engels likewise thinks he can't say much meaningful about this future morality, criticizing Dühring for thinking one could; “[Dühring] himself declares what up to the present has been hid from the rest of us that he understands the structure of this future society at least as regards its salient features” (Engels, 103). Engels and Marx do suggest some elements for the future post-class society themselves, for instance in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, but never claimed to know how these elements would be systematized. This is entirely consistent with their general theory of history. What Marx and Engels could speak on in more detail was the general outlines of proletarian morality itself, as it had already begun to form. These values include collective control over the length of the workday and working conditions, opposition to structural racism and sexism, and the goal of the abolition of class itself.

Marx and Engels, therefore, see themselves as articulating dimensions of proletarian morality, but not the final form universal morality would take. We can see the ethical system operating in the case of the working day. The working class finds itself exploited under capitalism, either as overworked employees or an underworked “reserve army”. The harm of this overwork motivates them to advance norms such as a shorter working day. Proletarian norms evolve over time, as demands for a 10 hour workday become demands for an 8 hour workday as increased productivity enables further reductions. The ultimate end is direct collective working class control over the workday, instead of the length of the workday being set by an alien class or even state regulation. Thus, proletarian norms develop through social change, as the exact character of the

harms and their structural causes shift over time – the demands that they seek are fundamentally moving targets, not moral absolutes.²²⁷

An interesting case of this kind of evolution can be found in Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany*. Engels argues that the virtue of austerity was important for peasant revolutions in the medieval era and was valued in the Christian mysticism frequently advocated by such revolutionaries. Moreover, this virtue can be found amongst early proletarian revolutionaries too:

Already here, with the first precursor of the movement, we find the asceticism typical of all medieval uprisings tinged with religion and, in modern times, of the early stages of every proletarian movement. This ascetic austerity of morals, this demand to forsake all joys of life and all entertainments, opposes the ruling classes with the principle of Spartan equality, on the one hand, and is, on the other, a necessary stage of transition without which the lowest stratum of society can never set itself in motion. (Engels, *MECW Volume 10* 429)

This is because this virtue is necessary for their development, consciousness, and unity as a class:

²²⁷ The evolutionary notion of morality is well expressed in Engels's full quotation of Morgan in the epigraph:

“Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects, as well as the obligations and the limits of the rights of its owners. The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations. A mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time which has passed away since civilization is but a fragment of the past duration of man's existence; and but a fragment of the ages yet to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence, and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes (Morgan as quoted by Engels, 1972, 216-217)”

In order to develop its revolutionary energy, to become conscious of its own hostile attitude towards all other elements of society, to concentrate itself as a class, it must begin by stripping itself of everything that could reconcile it with the existing social system; it must renounce the few pleasures that make its wretched existence in the least tolerable for the moment, and of which even the severest oppression could not deprive it. This *plebian and proletarian* asceticism differs both in its wild fanatical form and in its essence from the bourgeois asceticism of the Lutheran burgher morality and of the English Puritans ... whose entire secret amounts to *bourgeois thrift*. (Engels, *MECW Volume 10* 429)

Though this virtue was once essential to the development of peasant and proletarian peoples, Engels goes on to say that this asceticism has lost its revolutionary nature due to the increased productive capacity of society and because the proletariat is so immiserated anyways. In Engels's time, this asceticism "degenerates either directly into bourgeois parsimony or into high-sounding virtuous which, in practice, degenerates to a philistine or guild-artisan meanness." (Engels, 429).

Sayers argues that Marx's historicist relativism and evolutionary theory of morality is a progressive notion.²²⁸ This is complicated by the theory of primitive accumulation, which presents bourgeois morality as more than simply progressive. We know that Marx saw bourgeois morality as an advancement on and evolution from earlier aristocratic morality and is in that sense progressive. However, bourgeois morality is already in some way degenerate from its outset as its origin in primitive accumulation required both ruthlessness and hypocrisy. This is found in Marx's account of the privatization of communal peasant land, as well as his account of colonization. For instance, Marx argues how bourgeois colonial rule has brought with it the rise of famine in India on a scale unseen in the era of native aristocratic rule, and how authorities in the New World paid settlers to commit genocide upon the indigenous

²²⁸ Sayers, chapter 8 "Moral Values and Progress"

populations in spite of their Christian faith.²²⁹ While bourgeois norms led to a progressive centralization that facilitated economies of scale which are necessary for industrial socialism, and though Marx saw the colonization of these societies as inevitable, it also led to new forms of dehumanization and social catastrophe.

Consequently, moral progress is not linear in nature:

Since civilization is founded on the exploitation of one class by another class, its whole development proceeds in a constant contradiction. Every step forward in production is at the same time a step backward in the position of the oppressed class, that is, of the greater majority. Whatever benefits some necessarily injures the others; every fresh emancipation of one class is necessarily a new oppression for another class. The most striking proof of this is provided by the introduction of machinery, the effects of which are now known to the whole world. And if among the barbarians, as we saw, the distinction between rights and duties could hardly be drawn, civilization makes the difference and antagonism between them clear even to the dullest intelligence by giving one class practically all the rights and the other class practically all the duties. (Engels, 1972 215-216)

Moral progress is better understood as a kind of dialectical spiral which moves towards the truth only indirectly until class itself is abolished.

The good life and class morality in Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State

One might ask, if this moral vision was important to Marx and Engels, why did they not present a full system of ethics? Wiredu criticizes Marx for not fleshing out any ethical views, which he blames for much of the problems of 20th century Marxist movements.²³⁰ Wiredu argues that the practical limitations placed on Marx are to blame as he was focused on addressing the economic mechanisms behind class.²³¹ Marx was a

²²⁹ Marx, 917

²³⁰ Wiredu, 79

²³¹ Wiredu, 81

systematic philosopher like Kant and Hegel, but economic critique was the most pressing issue, and he did not even finish the three later volumes of *Capital*. Another reason we've already seen is that even if they could spell out aspects or general principles of the system of proletarian morality, the conditions that produce the content of proletarian morality would continue to change and develop in ways which neither had the opportunity to see. Consider, what would a good post-class sexual ethics consist of? Marx and Engels had little specific to say on these questions. Any answers they could have given would have been speculative to the point of being counterproductive. Yet they did give general outlines for a universal ethics that can govern daily life from within the proletarian standpoint.

Marx and Engels did at times assert that certain things are universal goods and speak to the relative quality of social norms considering the ability to realize these goods. In his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels gives an account of sexual ethics which is consistent with this theoretical framework. Sexual morality develops from archaic society to feudal aristocracy, to the bourgeoisie, and finally the proletariat. Aristocratic morality values marriage made on political and economic terms while also believing in a romantic ideal of adulterous love (for example, the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere).²³² The bourgeoisie does value romantic love in marriage, but it rarely realizes it in practice as the bourgeoisie must also marry for economic and political reasons.²³³ Finally, the proletariat has the possibility of love marriage because they have no property, though they lack the time and resources to freely share time with their loved ones. When he comes to the question of a sexual

²³² Engels, 1972 108-109

²³³ Engels, 1972, 112

morality after class society, Engels has little to say as he lacks the standpoint necessary to give such details;

But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. (Engels, 114)

This is not to say Engels is without normative commitments when it comes to love and the family. He clearly defends mutual romantic love as a non-alienated and authentic human relationship over and against the alienated family relations found in class society, a demand echoed by Karl Kautsky less than a decade later as essential to the socialist project.²³⁴ This is a general principle that can be derived from the conditions that cause suffering in our own society. In spite of the ability to derive such general principles, it is utopian to think that people of an earlier epoch like Marx and Engels could articulate the ethical system of the future in its totality. Their standpoint lacks the objective conditions of such a society. When it comes to the details, future generations will not need counsel from people like Engels, and “will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice ... (Engels 114).

Is “class standpoint” a sufficient basis for ethics?

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some problems for which Marx and Engels do not have a clear solution. For Marx and Engels, it is obvious that moral standpoints, and standpoints in general, are best understood in terms of class. However, there are differences which cannot be reduced to class alone. Bentham and Kant are

²³⁴ Kautsky, 27

both bourgeois moralists, however they come to profoundly opposed conclusions in how to understand bourgeois morality. Though we might imagine stories that Engels and Marx could tell us about the differences between the German and British bourgeoisie (and they do in fact provide some distinctions along these lines), they do not reveal how these differences produce the kinds of distinctions found between Kant and Bentham. Second, though Marx and Engels do discuss how oppression along the lines of gender, race and nationality undermine class solidarity, it is not clear how their notion of class morality relates to other oppressed populations such as the indigenous. Finally, a class may find itself divided along lines that may be related to but remain distinct from their class status. For instance, if a gold mine is facing closure due to environmental damage that harms the health of farmworkers, the farmworkers and miners will find themselves at odds.²³⁵ Though Marx and Engels can clearly explain the differing interests between these two groups, there is no clear way to reconcile them given in their ethical arguments. None of these problems are fatal for the meta-ethics given by Marx and Engels, but they all suggest that it needs more clarification and development.

Critique of the Gotha Program

The Gotha Program was the policy platform of the nascent German socialist party, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or Social Democratic Party (SPD), which formed from the merger of the Social Democratic Worker's Party (SDAP), which Marx himself supported, with the United Worker's Party (ADAV) of Lassalle. Marx consequently sought to lay out his substantial differences with Lassalle. Marx

²³⁵ Ernst Mandel provides an interesting example of this very phenomenon in the case of the 1968 teacher's strike in New York, which pitted teachers against largely working-class Black and Puerto Rican populations (Mandel, 28)

considered Lassalle to be an opportunistic character instead of a principled advocate for total proletarian emancipation. I argue that the “Critique of the Gotha Program” confirms that Marx holds a view of ethics like the one Engels describes. In the Critique, Marx maps out a proletarian concept of equality which shifts and develops over time as conditions change, culminating with a universally valid notion of equality that realizes the needs of all individuals.

Marx on “fair distribution”, and the evolving ethics of production and distribution

Marx critiques the notion of fair distribution which the Lassalleans draw from the individual’s supposed right to an undiminished portion of the proceeds of labor. Marx’s central critique is over what, exactly, a “fair” distribution of goods means. Marx has several significant criticisms of this concept. First, for Marx socialism is a method of organizing production first and foremost and is only concerned with distribution secondarily. Lassalle’s formulation instead focuses on distribution first and the control of the means of production second. Though the Gotha Program does go on to call for the socialization of the means of production, it is a means to achieve fair distribution and not an end in itself. Second, Lassalle’s view rests on an intuitive and uncritical notion of fairness and does not interrogate this concept which raises questions about what exactly Lassalle means by it. Does fairness mean everyone gets something proportionate to the quantity and quality of their labor, or does it mean that everyone receives the same goods, or does it mean something else entirely? How are necessary deductions for administration, maintenance, expansion and other social forms of consumption determined? Third, the idea of “proceeds of labor” is misleading as, Marx argues,

“proceeds” imply the growth of an individual’s private property instead of the expansion of common resources.

These ambiguities, Marx argues, stem from the fact that the Gotha Program does not consider its demands in context of class and history. At first, any future socialist society will still be emerging from its conditioning under capitalism:

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society – after the deductions have been made – exactly what he gives to it. ... The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another. (Marx, 1970, 9)

In this system, proceeds of labor will be distributed according to how much individuals work, in line with the bourgeois notion of just exchange (what Jon Elster calls the “contribution principle”). Every individual receives goods proportionate to their work. Marx considers this to be a lower form of communism or socialism where people are still accustomed to bourgeois norms like working in exchange for material wellbeing. It is lower in the sense that proletarian morality hasn’t been fully realized in the form of a classless society. Under such conditions, proletarian morality has not entirely moved past its bourgeois roots.

In the lower form of communism, the concept of equality remains unrealized. Society does establish equality on a higher level by abolishing class, but natural inequalities remain. Consider Marx’s example of family differences. While one spouse might receive wages for their work, this wage is shared among the family. Therefore, the apparent equality of class abolition has still not dealt with natural inequalities that are prior to the individual’s class status as human relations are still characterized by the

commodity form. These shortcomings are excusable, for a society still working through its birth-pangs:

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 conditioned thereby. (Marx, 10)

Here we see the return of the historical conditioning Engels discussed, but with the added nuance that class norms themselves shift over time. Even proletarian norms are early on marked by their origins within the womb of bourgeois society.

Proletarian morality transitions through this period, away from the bourgeois norms from which it emerged and towards a new approach to both production and distributive justice:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative 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 ability, to each according to his needs! (Marx, 10)

The new proletarian system is premised on three moral developments, all of which recall the humanistic concerns of the *1844 Manuscripts*: (1) the individual is no longer dominated by the division of labor but finds themselves cultivated and enriched through their work; (2) there is no longer a hierarchy of mental labor over physical labor; and (3) labor is no longer an alien imposition but life's "prime want". It is also premised on two non-moral developments: (1) increasing technical means of production; and (2) abundance of co-operative wealth. From these conditions emerges the highest possible formulation of productive and distributive justice; "from each according to his ability, to

each according to his needs”. Insofar as human needs are consumptive, this conclusion is clearly a principle of distributive justice. Yet, insofar as work itself is a human need for Marx, this is also a principle of productive justice. Work is not only distributed according to people’s abilities, but insofar as their abilities are a necessary means of self-realization, everyone has access to the work they need to develop their humanity. By overlooking the lesson of *Capital* that distribution follows from production, the Gotha Program conceals the real substance of both socialist politics and proletarian morality:

Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself. ... Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of the democrats) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution. After the real relation has long been made clear, why retrogress again? (Marx, 10-11)

Consequently, proletarian notions of morality ought to operate around the question of the means of production, not distributive justice.

Jon Elster argues that Marx’s account of the movement from capitalism to the “need principle” is inconsistent. Elster accuses Marx of using the higher “need principle” to judge the “lower” stage of communism defective, which Elster compares to arguing “in prose against the possibility of talking prose,”²³⁶ which is to say that Marx is renouncing higher principles while appealing to a higher principle. That is to say, Marx implies that the need principle is a trans-historical moral principle that stands in judgement against the contribution principle. Elster interprets this idea of Marx as a “hierarchical theory of justice” where society has to become “ripe” for the “higher”

²³⁶ Elster, 222

principles of justice to become manifest.²³⁷ This is an understandable criticism, but it forgets the fact that Marx's notion of the good life understands ethical rules as part of a greater living ethical totality, and not as self-justifying principles. A principle of justice like "to each according to their ability, to each according to their need" cannot be applied in Marx's own society.²³⁸ It is simply a utopian normative ideal, not a moral principle.²³⁹ He cannot speak with specificity about what those needs are or how they will be determined so he cannot speak to the ethical system in its totality, but he can identify the universal principles which this totality will be built upon.

Notably, the fact that people habituated under capitalism are not ready for the "higher" form of distribution problematizes the claim made by McCarthy and others that for Marx, human flourishing is self-realization. This is not an entirely false claim, but it requires further clarification. Self-realization is specifically the realization of a specific human nature, but we have seen that for Marx human nature is variable. Workers and capitalists in a sense are distinct subspecies of human with distinct reified natures, and neither nature is capable of flourishing in a society where work doesn't translate to a wage. Consequently, both are only ever capable of a lesser form of human flourishing, or at best some momentary flourishing. As well as removing obstacles in the way of people realizing their nature, we must create human beings capable of realization. True self-

²³⁷ Elster, 230

²³⁸ Instead of thinking that the "higher" principle of "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" is "higher" in an absolute sense, we should recognize that it is higher insofar as it is the norm of a society that extends flourishing and not insofar as it meets an ahistorical a priori ethical standard.

²³⁹ In his essay "The Marxian Critique of Justice and Rights", Buchanan goes so far as to argue that this isn't even an ethical principle of justice so much as simply a description of how life will be in a stateless, classless communist society – though it is still a normative ideal from a contemporary standpoint, it doesn't function in any way as a notion of "distributive justice" in the future society.

realization is only possible under the principle “for each according to their ability, to each according to their need”, but such a system would not produce self-realization for those already habituated under a market economy since they still understand work as something which ought to be rewarded by incentives.

The workers as a collective agent

In the left-Hegelian reading of the Master-Slave dialectic, the slave must accomplish their own liberation. Likewise, Marx critiques the Gotha Program for placing the agency of the worker’s emancipation on the state instead of the workers themselves. Though the working class might use the state as an instrument to achieve their goals, they cannot grant others the subjective responsibility for their liberation – in fact, they cannot, and any attempt to do so is self-defeating;

That the workers desire to establish the conditions for co-operative production on a social scale, and first of all on a national scale, in their own country, only means that they are working to revolutionize the present conditions of production, and it has nothing in common with the foundation of co-operative societies with state aid. But as far as the present co-operative societies are concerned, they are of value only insofar as they are the independent creations of the workers and not proteges either of the governments or of the bourgeois. (Marx, 15)

The working class can achieve emancipation only through becoming a class which is responsible for its own emancipation.²⁴⁰ This requires substantial development and cultivation of the class as a self-conscious political agent. The class morality of an oppressed and exploited class is the normative expression of this demand for emancipation.

²⁴⁰ Interestingly, Rosa Luxemburg argued that Lenin’s advocacy for a central committee to manage the revolution is a move away from Marx and a return to the politics of the French revolutionary Blanqui, in giving the working class a passive role in their own emancipation (Luxemburg, “Marxism or Leninism”)

A similar argument is found in a more developed form in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. In that text, Fanon argues that white people granting formal emancipation and equality only offered a false emancipation. This is because the black subject is still passive in their relationship to the white subject.²⁴¹ As emancipation involves the development of agency on the part of the oppressed, it can only be gained through the positive action of the oppressed. Through positive action for the sake of their own emancipation, the black subject realizes in themselves the kind of agency which is itself a necessary condition for emancipation. This theme runs throughout Marx's texts. We not only see it here but saw something like it in the *1844 Manuscripts* as well as the development of the proletarian demand around the working day. Through their efforts to achieve equality in the working day, the working class developed as a self-aware subject. In becoming a self-aware collective subject, the working class can secure its own destiny. It develops both collectively through the creation of collective interest, norms for good behavior and mechanisms for exercising power, but also individually through the development of skills, needs and social connections.

Irony and hypocrisy in the bourgeois and proletarian standpoints

As we have seen, Wood's reading is that Marx and Engels treat morality merely as a description of what a particular economic and political system deems to be righteous. This section will problematize that claim by looking at how Marx uses irony and identifies hypocrisy when analyzing the bourgeois standpoint in *Capital*. As Wood reads Marx, since bourgeois morality asserts that labor exploitation is just, it must be morally justified within capitalism. Consequently, the proletariat must reject morality itself to

²⁴¹ Fanon, Chapter 7, "The Negro and Reconciliation"

free themselves from the bonds of capitalism. Yet this reading overlooks how Marx's ironic and satirical treatment of bourgeois morality is in line with the meta-ethical view given by Engels in *Anti-Dühring* and suggests his alignment with proletarian morality. This section will also advance the argument made in section 2.3 that the progressive notion of class relativism does not mean that the morality of a new class is progressive from the outset. On the contrary, Marx and Engels think bourgeois morality, despite its progressive character, was ridden with intrinsic hypocrisy from its genesis.

The ironic character of bourgeois morality

According to Wood's argument, Marx thinks exchange relations in capitalism are just but also that justice itself is an intrinsically ideological concept. In addressing Wood's use of a passage in Marx where he says that capitalist exploitation is "just", Husami criticizes this view for missing the satirical element of Marx's writing;

Actually, the passage on which they rely is bogus – it occurs in a context in which Marx is plainly satirizing capitalism. Marx, immediately after the passage in question, characterizes the appropriation of surplus labor as a "trick". (Husami, 189).

In his response to Husami,²⁴² Wood acknowledges the ironic dimension of Marx's writing, but reads it differently. For Wood, the irony is that exchange relations *are* just within capitalism, but that justice is an entirely worthless concept. Marx reduces justice to juridical relations, and insofar as capitalist exploitation is just then so much the worse for justice.²⁴³ I take Marx's point to be that structuring society according to bourgeois moral principle in practice leads to outcomes that are at odds with its own principles. The truth of a particular morality as Engels presents it is in how well it grasps human

²⁴² Wood, 1981, 112

²⁴³ The debate between Wood and Husami can be found in their essays in *Marx, History and Justice* as well as *Marx Analyzed* and *Analytical Marxism*

flourishing relative to existing conditions. Marx uses irony as a literary technique to expose bourgeois morality, and in doing so he reveals that the juridical notions of justice valued by the bourgeoisie are not only empty but Janus-faced.

We have seen how an apparently fair exchange between the capitalist and the worker is from the worker's standpoint an unequal and coercive exchange.²⁴⁴ In practice, 'free' exchange is founded on the force of necessity such that worker has no option but to accept onerous conditions of employment. We have also seen Marx argue that the "free competition" of capitalism imposes business decisions on capitalists that harm their employees;

Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him. (Marx, 381)

These are not the only examples of this irony in *Capital* and other works by Marx: capital demands both productivity and austerity from workers even though austerity starves workers of the health they need to be productive;²⁴⁵ free market competition creates monopolistic behemoths that suffocate all competition;²⁴⁶ the liberal notion of abstract equality justifies real inequality;²⁴⁷ and many more.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ Refer to the passage cited in chapter 4: "The contract by which he sold his labour-power to the capitalist was black and white, so to speak, that he was free to dispose of himself. But when the transaction was concluded, it was discovered that he was no 'free agent'..." (Marx, 415-416)

²⁴⁵ Marx, 809

²⁴⁶ Marx, 777

²⁴⁷ Marx, 280

²⁴⁸ In her *Women, Race, Class*, Angela Davis points to perhaps the most telling case of ruling class hypocrisy in the prohibition against the education of slaves. Black slaves were simultaneously viewed as not sufficiently intelligent to receive an education, and too dangerous to educate since they might revolt if they were. The obvious tension between these two positions speaks to the incoherence of the ethical and moral "defenses" of slavery, both internally and with reality itself.

In this respect, Marx is not unlike Cervantes. The conditions that bestowed legitimate value of chivalric knightly morality were conditions of persistent violence and instability, limited productive capacity, widespread subsistence agriculture and intense parochialism. In such conditions, chivalric ideals were attractive to people seeking either protection or glory from a familiar noble elite.²⁴⁹ Ideals of chivalry served to regulate the violence intrinsic in feudal strife while also honoring those who staked their life in such violence. Peasant farmers wanted to be secure, levies needed to be well-led, and the upper nobility desired a loyal military machine. Nobility was established and preserved not only through violence, but through the self-regulation of one's violence in accordance with these norms. Once the Reconquista was complete and a certain level of civil peace was realized within Spanish society, the social conditions that made chivalry meaningful no longer held. Consequently, the chivalrous knight became increasingly redundant, as neither the upper nobility nor the peasants have any need for a militarized class of lower nobility.²⁵⁰

The ironic character of *Capital* is explicated by Robert Paul Wolff in his *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky*. Wolff argues that irony as Socrates and Marx use it reveals two or three layers of truth which are apparent to different audiences.²⁵¹ The most superficial layer of irony is the false one which the ignorant take to be true, for instance that Gorgias is wise. The second and third audiences see deeper truths that contradict the superficial truth, for example that Gorgias is not wise, and that neither Gorgias nor Socrates are wise respectively. In the case of Marx's description of economic

²⁴⁹ Childers, 11

²⁵⁰ Childers, 17

²⁵¹ Wolff, 29

exchange, the first audience is the bourgeoisie for whom exchange relations really are just. The second audience is the proletariat who increasingly grasps the irony of bourgeois morality due to the inequality and coercion concealed in the exchange relation. As Wolff argues, the second audience doesn't merely grasp their own interpretation, but understand the apparent, superficial interpretation and why it is mistaken in a way that sublates it; "... the second audience's knowledge of the double meaning, and its awareness of its privileged position vis-à-vis the first audience, is a part of what it understands when it hears the utterance" (Wolff, 37). In other words, Marx's use of irony in his discussion of bourgeois morality and its critique by the proletariat implies the deeper truth of the proletarian standpoint.

From irony to hypocrisy

Marx also describes the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in his critique: large capital grows by buying out its competition but opposes unions due to their cartel-like features;²⁵² capitalists seek free trade but work to deny the rights of workers to emigrate during a crisis;²⁵³ capitalists insist on respect for the law of supply and demand, but happily use force to increase labor supply in the colonies.²⁵⁴ This is particularly notable in Marx's treatment of primitive accumulation. In the article "The Duchess of Sutherland and Slavery," Marx juxtaposes the Duchess's opposition to slavery with the ruthless exploitation and dispossession of Scottish peasants by her family:

Thus my lady Countess appropriated to herself 794,000 acres of land, which from time immemorial had belonged to the clan. In the exuberance of her generosity she allotted to the expelled natives about 6,000 acres — two acres per family. These 6,000 acres had been lying waste until then, and brought

²⁵² Marx, 793-794

²⁵³ Marx, 720

²⁵⁴ Marx, 794

no revenue to the proprietors. The Countess was generous enough to sell the acre at 2s 6d on an average, to the clan-men who for centuries past had shed their blood for her family. The whole of the unrightfully appropriated clan-land she divided into 29 large sheep farms, each of them inhabited by one single family, mostly English farm-laborers; and in 1821 the 15,000 Gaels had already been superseded by 131,000 sheep.

This process of expropriation was, in effect, English colonialism against the ancient Gaelic inhabitants of these regions. Marx explicitly describes this act as robbery:

If of any property it ever was true that it was robbery, it is literally true of the property of the British aristocracy. Robbery of Church property, robbery of commons, fraudulent transformation, accompanied by murder, of feudal and patriarchal property into private property — these are the titles of British aristocrats to their possessions. And what services in this latter process were performed by a servile class of lawyers, you may see from an English lawyer of the last century, Dalrymple, who, in his *History of Feudal Property*, very naively proves that every law or deed concerning property was interpreted by the lawyers, in England, when the middle class rose in wealth in favor of the middle class — in Scotland, where the nobility enriched themselves, in favor of the nobility — in either case it was interpreted in a sense hostile to the people.

Like all patterns of dispossession in primitive accumulation, this process throws the natives into the working class, now toiling in factories instead of working freely on their land. Marx ends his article by stating that because of his pattern of hypocrisy, the Duchess has “no right” to criticize slavery. Marx is not criticizing her for opposing slavery — something he clearly does himself — but for doing so while also benefiting from an analogous process.

The hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie runs throughout Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation. The bourgeois standpoint views the origins of wealth as hard work and free exchange, but capitalism emerged from brutal expropriation which simultaneously led to individual accumulation among some and the immiseration of others. The idea that capitalism emerged out of free exchange is no less an idealized myth as the notion of a knight-errant. Consequently, the capitalist system has never met even its own

idealized standards of justice. From this we can conclude that for Marx, the bourgeois standpoint isn't merely decadent but has always been thoroughly ideological, however much it is associated with the social progress of early modernity. As Engels argues, this is an intrinsic part of how the bourgeoisie justify their own existence in the face of the exploitation upon which they depend:

But that should not be; what is good for the ruling class must also be good for the whole of society with which the ruling class identifies itself. Therefore the more civilization advances, the more it is compelled to cover the evils it necessarily creates with the cloak of love and charity, to palliate them or to deny them – in short, to introduce a conventional hypocrisy which was unknown to earlier forms of society and even to the first stages of civilization, and which culminates in the pronouncement: the exploitation of the oppressed class is carried on by the exploiting class simply and solely in the interests of the exploited class itself; and if the exploited class cannot see it and even grows rebellious, that is the basest ingratitude to its benefactors, the exploiters. (Engels, 1972 216)

This “conventional hypocrisy,” as Engels calls it, is a consequence of the distance between the reality of capitalist society and the moral standpoint which justifies it. As the moral standpoint of the ruling class presupposes that their way of life is good for humanity, they must also understand this system as good for the exploited. Such theories are easy to justify in the terms of the dominant economic and political system, but upon critique they reveal themselves to be ultimately self-serving theories ridden with internal contradiction.

As a stark contrast to his treatment of hypocritical capitalists, Marx praises workers for their moral consistency and attentiveness to the real needs of others in the face of economic deprivation. He details the virtue of the English agricultural proletariat despite their dehumanizing conditions, and emphasizes their class-conscious loathing of the exploitative gang system:

While the Liberal press asked how the fine gentlemen and ladies, and well-paid clergy of the state Church, with whom Lincolnshire swarms, people who expressly send out missions to the antipodes 'for the improvement of the morals of South Sea Islanders', could allow such a system to arise on their estates, under their very eyes, the more refined newspapers confined themselves to reflections on the coarse degradation of an agricultural population which was capable of selling its children into such slavery! Under the accursed conditions to which these 'delicate' people condemn the agricultural labourer, it would not be surprising if he ate his own children. What is really wonderful is the healthy integrity of character he has largely retained. The official reports prove that the parents, even in the gang districts, loathe the gang-system. (Marx, 853-854)

In this footnote, Marx explicitly contrasts the hypocrisy of the moralistic rural bourgeoisie, the church and the "refined" press with the integrity of the agricultural proletariat. While the bourgeois standpoint understands the suffering of children working in the gang system as the fault of the parents and sanctifies the system which produces these outrages, the workers know the real cause and nature of the gang system. Moreover, they are able to retain a kind of integrity and moral character in spite of these circumstances, but this is concealed by the habituated prejudice of the ruling class.

Conclusion - the flourishing approach and class ethics

The dynamic and historically contextualized ethics outlined by Marx and Engels is not the view outlined by Wood, Tucker or Althusser. It does, at times, follow the contours of the Justice Approach by suggesting that proletarian ethics centers on principles of distributive justice or normative concepts like equality which capitalist relations violate. Ultimately, however, we see that Marx and Engels justify proletarian morality with the Flourishing Approach, as principles of justice are downstream from concerns around well-being. In fact, juridical ethics should be redundant in a society

sufficiently organized according to the goal of human flourishing.²⁵⁵ The ideal of flourishing that Marx sees running through the texts is universal, though not as an absolute transhistorical principle as Jon Elster argues.²⁵⁶ It is universal in the sense that it is contingent on conditions that happen to hold universally. Marx argues that labor itself is the common theme that unites all societies across history, as well as the social character of work. Fully humanized individuals of any society seek out the fulfillment not only of their own needs but those whom they love, and they do this by literally changing the world through labor. Yet as we have seen, this universally valid trait is always manifested imperfectly under alienated social conditions.

The class-relative meta-ethics of Marx and Engels blends their philosophical anthropology with their empirical social science. It aims to account for the diversity of moral intuitions and systems with their general notion of the human good without claiming to provide a final system of ethics. This is not to open these thinkers up to the common criticisms against subjective relativism, where morality is simply a matter of culture, personal perspective, or emotional states. As Fisk says, this is relativism of the Einsteinian variety, which is to say, relative to objective features of the world and social practices. Yet this is not to say that all morality is valid simply in virtue of being relative to a class. Classes emerge with grievances whose redress leads to tangible improvements for the human condition. Once society has progressed to a certain point, however, these moral systems become increasingly reified, decadent and inhibitive of flourishing. Either ruling class morality must come up with increasingly convoluted rationalizations

²⁵⁵ Buchanan notes this in his *Marxism and Justice* – the point being that rules of justice are merely there to cope with the contradictions and tensions inherent in a class society.

²⁵⁶ Elster, 219

for the existing order, or simply abandon any pretense of moral self-justification. In its place comes the morality of that class which grasps both the barriers to human flourishing and their power to change those conditions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this dissertation, we've seen how Marx does in fact endorse proletarian morality – at least, the morality of a proletariat that has developed self-consciousness. We've also seen how Marx and Engels think that this proletarian morality best captures human nature since it centers on social labor as its primary activity, and because it correctly identifies the existing limitations on human flourishing. This clearly conflicts with the interpretation of Marx as an entirely descriptive thinker devoted to only interpreting our material conditions. It is true that Marx was first and foremost interested in developing a descriptive and explanatory account of social and economic mechanisms, but this was motivated by his sympathy with the indignation of the workers. The empirical and scientific work in *Capital* serves to give that indignation a theoretical basis. This is important for three rather distinct reasons. First, it resolves a current debate in the philosophical literature on the nature of Marx's ethical views. Second, it addresses the ethical costs of how we structure work, which is an activity which dominates the waking life of most adult human beings. Third, it has important ramifications for how Marxists should understand the "Crisis of Marxism", which refers to how the working class ultimately failed to create the kind of self-consciousness or emancipatory moral system Marx and Engels described.

In its two sections, this conclusion will accomplish three tasks. First, it will briefly systematize the arguments made across this monograph to give a comprehensive view of Marx's ethics. Second, it will go into the ethical ramifications of Marx's arguments for

how we structure work in the 21st century. Finally, it will develop how some of these themes were tackled by Marxists faced with the failure of the working class to revolt in the late 19th century through the early 21st century, as well as the failure of the working class to even defend their historical gains.

Systematizing Marx's ethics

As we saw, Marx and Engels left us without a work devoted to ethics. It is not that their philosophy lacked an ethics as Wood and Althusser argue, but that they were interested in developing their theory in other directions. Instead, their ethical views are scattered across their works. The closest we get to a single theoretical work devoted to ethics are Marx's *1844 Manuscripts* and Engels's critique of Dühring's philosophy. The first gives us a detailed understanding of their view of human nature but is largely abstract and leaves us without clear and specific normative values, while the second does more to address their meta-ethical views. Instead, we need to look at how ethics appear or are suggested by other aspects of their theory. This section will briefly systematize the ethical theory laid out in the earlier chapters, and then will draw three important strengths of Marx's ethics: (1) the historical self-awareness of Marx's and Engels's ethical claims; (2) the holistic picture of human nature in labor; and (3) the social notion of virtue and practical wisdom implicit across Marx's work.

Meta-ethics of class

As shown in chapter 5, Marx's meta-ethics understands morality to be relative to class, at least within the horizons of class society. As one's way of life is determined by their class, ethics can be divided among the various class distinctions made by Marx and Engels: the despots; the slave-owning aristocracy; the slaves; the feudal aristocracy; the

lesser nobility; the princes; the petty bourgeoisie; the peasants; the clergy; the bourgeoisie; the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat. All these moralities have various flaws, and none are entirely commensurate with one another. Though every moral standpoint claims to understand the morality of other standpoints, only the more progressive classes truly understand the moral content of the more conservative or reactionary classes. However, a moral argument in itself will not convince a member of the bourgeoisie, and even if it did that does not mean that the bourgeoisie as a class can ever realize that ethical critique through their own actions. The most important positive function that morality has for Marx and Engels is not in convincing the ruling class to abandon their wicked ways, but instead for various classes to regulate their own behavior in relation to one another and in relation to other classes. For instance, workers must be able to trust one another and form links of solidarity that transcend individual self-interest. Moreover, the proletariat must develop courage to struggle in the face of potential hardship and even violence to secure their basic human needs. Without courage and solidarity, few workers would face potential self-annihilation on behalf of their comrades as the French Communards did in 1873, the English workers did in St Peter's Field (Peterloo) in 1819, and as the American workers did in Haymarket in 1886.

The fact that Marx and Engels acknowledge the limits of their standpoint is a strength of their moral approach, not a weakness, as their own moral arguments take for granted that their own normative claims are historically conditioned. As we saw Engels argue, the people living in a classless society will be wiser than he and Marx were on moral issues due to the distance between their respective historical standpoints. Their

dialectical method can reveal certain fundamental trends or principles underpinning our norms. We saw how Engels argued that the morality of marriage was underpinned by the tension between romantic love and the political and economic conditions of the family. He also determined that romantic love was the sexual relation most conducive to human flourishing. However, he explicitly refused to make any claims about discovering (or being able to discover) eternal and universal norms regarding marriage. Thus, the moral system of Marx and Engels admits that moral progress will continue in ways in which they could not possibly foresee. This frees them of a critique faced Aristotle, Aquinas, Bentham, and Kant, namely that their moral systems either failed to anticipate or even opposed important cases of moral progress. This was because they reified the conditions of their own times in ways which blinded them to important problems. We saw already how Aristotle's moral system justifies slavery and patriarchy. Though these systems can admit to a degree of historical contextualization,²⁵⁷ none of these systems sufficiently own their historical limitations and acknowledge how society will progress past their own formulations.

The working day and the soundness of the proletarian standpoint

As we saw in chapter 4, Marx defends the soundness of the proletarian standpoint in terms of how it better grasps social conditions than the bourgeois standpoint. This is best seen in the dialectic of the working day, though it is also found in the descriptions by Marx and Engels of working conditions, housing, sexual relations, and other dimensions of 19th century life. Though the bourgeoisie was progressive in its recognition of the flaws of aristocratic privilege, the fact that bourgeois daily practice

²⁵⁷ Allen Wood's *Kant's Ethical Thought* provides an interesting argument that Kant in some ways anticipates Marx's historical materialism (Wood, 294)

centers on the activity of exchange means that their moral system ultimately understands morality in terms of mutually agreed upon contracts. Their standpoint is blind to the coercive aspects of the 19th century labor market, and the way in which the “free exchange” of money for work leads inevitably to over-working the proletariat.

This dialectic of the working day is something we saw Marx develop thoroughly in *Capital*. Even though *Capital* is first and foremost a work of economic theory, it details how the economic tensions between capitalists and workers over the working day are mirrored in the moral concerns of these two classes. The text focuses on the economic mechanisms and aims to describe and explain the causal relations of capitalism, but we saw how he also made ethical claims, as well as justified ethical claims he and Engels made elsewhere. Moreover, the casual account works to justify the ethical claims made by working class social movements in general. These causes are the causal structures described by Marx in *Capital*, and the proletarian moral standpoint can be seen in the struggle over the working day. In that respect, Marx not only intends to describe the mechanisms that determine economic growth, crises, and exploitation but also the response of workers to these mechanisms and how their needs and desires were responsive to these mechanisms.

One important insight in Marx’s theory is the overwhelming significance of work for the wellbeing of all human beings. As well as meeting needs and taking up time, health and energy, work is a part of what makes life meaningful. This gives labor an existential significance beyond the everyday moral aspects of labor such as the harms caused by exploitation. Yet moral philosophers have not given labor attention proportionate to this significance. Marx’s arguments therefore serve as an important

reminder to consider how we work as a central question in ethics. Even if one rejects the socialist project to which Marx dedicated his work, the core issues raised by Marx remain. So long as these issues remain unaddressed, work will continue to be exploitative and the working conditions will continue to be alienating, and these will continue to be the most pressing moral problems faced by a significant portion of people. If anything, the problematics have only expanded since the time of Marx as the ecological and cultural consequences of capitalism and industry are better understood.

Human nature and progressive holism

In chapter 2, we saw how Marx and Engels have a holistic notion of both society and the individual. Human nature is embedded into a host of social relations with other individuals and groups. This allows Marx to articulate a unique theory of human nature which is not reducible to simple concepts but is constantly expanding and growing as new modes and means of producing are invented. Marx is not alone among enlightenment and post-enlightenment theorists in grounding his ethics on a notion of human nature. However, unlike others, Marx's theory of human nature resists definition in terms of a simple essence. A fascist might define human nature in terms of discrete biological types while an economic liberal might define human nature in terms of the pursuit of egotistical self-interest. Evolutionary psychologists might argue whether humans are "naturally" monogamous or polygamous. Like Marx, these notions rest on notions of human nature, but unlike these other theorists Marx's notion of human nature cannot be reduced to a single type of behavior or motive. We saw, for instance, how Marx resists reducing human nature either to altruism or egoism. Whether altruism or selfishness are called for depends on the context and the society in question,

and the two can go hand in hand. Extreme avarice is still regarded by Marx and Engels as an attitude which leads inevitably to dehumanizing and mistreating others, but such avarice is only possible insofar as society rewards it.

As the ways in which people work socially is historically contingent, Marx has a fundamentally plastic notion of what it is to be human. This makes his notion of human flourishing more universal than that of Aristotle, despite its similarities with Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. Though Aristotle's idea of human nature is not static, it is nonetheless bound by his aristocratic values such that he thinks contemplation will always be the most fulfilling and edifying human activity, with practical political activity and virtuous action following close behind. Good work is at best a lesser form of fulfillment that provides a more limited and contingent form of human flourishing. For Marx on the other hand, human flourishing is available to those who engage in and have mastered any kind of emancipated labor, be it agriculture, toolmaking, or philosophical contemplation. What prevents flourishing is not the type of work, but the way in which that work is organized and undertaken, the tedium demanded by that type of labor, and the ends to which it is set towards. We can therefore facilitate human flourishing across society so long as our productive capacities and social organization are up to the task.

The limitations of Marx's ethics and the 20th century

Marx's approach to ethics faces two significant drawbacks. First, it wrongly concluded that proletarian class consciousness would develop progressively. This rests on his underestimation of the ability of the capitalist class to respond to crises and provide convincing alternatives to the proletariat, and an overestimation of the ability of the proletariat to guarantee collective self-empowerment in the face of demoralization.

This led to what has been termed the “Crisis in Marxism”, or the weakening of the proletarian movement and the decreasing ambition of working-class political movements.²⁵⁸ Second, though his objective approach to morality has advantages, its lack of a theory of human psychology left Marx without an account of the subjective dimensions of morality. These two problems led to numerous novel alterations of Marx’s theory, often through combination with other thinkers. Frankfurt School thinkers and Fanon, among others, incorporated Freudian psychoanalysis. Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty incorporated phenomenology and existentialism into their Marxism. African American Marxists like Cornel West and Angela Davis incorporated black American thought, from W.E.B. Dubois to bell hooks. The Philosophy of Liberation incorporated ideas not only from liberation theology and indigenous thought but Levinas. Žižek incorporates ideas from Lacan. Many also returned to Hegel, or looked to Kant, Kierkegaard and even Nietzsche. Althusser looked not only to Freud but the structuralist Saussure. A rigorous look at these approaches and how they modify or relate to Marx’s core ethical theory would be a series of dissertations in their own right, but this section will aim to at least situate these schools, show how they responded to the challenges of the 20th century, and how they modified or updated the thought of Marx and Engels.

The crisis in Marxism

Marx and Engels predicted the progressive expansion of working-class consciousness up until the point where they seize the means of production and replace the bourgeoisie as the socially dominant class. Yet this event only happened in the least

²⁵⁸ Kellner, 1988

developed countries like Russia, China, Cuba and various post-colonial states, and seemed to become more remote as the 20th century progressed. Those who supported revolutionary politics increasingly became divided along sectarian lines, those who wanted a reformist path to socialism grouped around the social democrats, and others remained or became staunch liberals or conservatives. Social democrats in turn became more moderate over the course of the Cold War. Many workers were attracted to nationalist, theocratic, imperialist, and even fascist politics. This process only deepened after the fall of the Soviet Union and Deng Xiaoping's reforms in mainland China. Moreover, though capitalism remained crisis-prone, the system proved resilient enough to respond to its crises, most notably those in 1928 and 2008. Even as the two world wars sapped a global capitalism organized around the United Kingdom, it fed a new order around the United States of America. This led to increasing pessimism about the possibility of a radical project. As Frederic Jameson said, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Jameson, 2003). This raises three questions – first, what natural, social or psychological forces did Marx and Engels overlook? Second, where should Marxist philosophy go from here? Finally, what new insights if any do later Marxist or Marxian philosophers offer in light of the Crisis of Marxism?

The social forces behind the failure of revolutionary politics in the 20th century are manifold. One arguable cause was the First World War, which served to divide the international working-class movement along national lines and deepened the division between those who sought revolutionary solutions and those who sought to achieve socialism through legal reforms. This can be seen in the divides within the SPD over whether to support the war. Another possible cause was the division between workers in

the metropole and on the periphery created by imperialism. In the first world, a greater portion of workers had secured a comfortable level of existence relative to the workers of the industrial revolution, while workers in the third world were (and often still are) relegated to less safe and more ruthlessly exploitative workplace conditions. Other parallel, albeit distinct, arguments could be made about the roles of racism and patriarchy as sources of hierarchy within the working class.

One more possible cause is the dynamism and genius of the bourgeoisie itself, which created a new consumer culture that Marx never conceived of. Though Marx did argue that the buying power of workers could increase under certain conditions, he did not imagine that capitalists would increase wages sufficiently to appeal to the working class. Aside from the increasing purchasing power of many workers, an intrinsic part of this was the development of new models of marketing, most notably those pioneered by Edward Bernays.²⁵⁹ This new model of marketing allowed capitalists to sell whole identities to the working class. In effect, the bourgeoisie created cultural conditions for workers to increasingly identify as consumers instead of as workers. Other thinkers like Simone Weil identified the demoralization and degradation of the working class as a cause.²⁶⁰ She found the work exceedingly dangerous and saw the workers as totally demoralized by the repetitive, and mind-numbing dimensions of their work. Harry Braverman has also argued for similar processes due to the implementation of Taylorism, as workers become increasingly regimented and dominated by management.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Interestingly, Bernays was also the nephew of Sigmund Freud

²⁶⁰ Weil, "Prospects" and "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression"

²⁶¹ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*

Finally, and ironically enough, the proletarian movement was a victim of its own success. Marx argued that the workers had to fight to shorten the working day, regulate the workplace, and increase wages, all of which subsequently happened. For Marx, these would be the first steps of a class-conscious, unified, and disciplined proletarian movement. When these goals were achieved, instead of moving on to fight for new victories many workers simply took what they had already won. They had struggled for and won the 8-hour workday, minimal regulations in workplace safety, improved pay, basic regulations on the quality of housing, public sanitation, the right to unionize and even social security systems through their sacrifice. The idea of sacrificing more when they had already won some degree of comfort was not attractive. This does not mean that the problems Marx and Engels identified were solved²⁶² – as Cornel West argues, American workers are still caught in the same systems Marx and Engels describe.²⁶³ On the contrary, an 8-hour workday is still exploitative when an even shorter working day has been made possible through the massive increase in productive capacity. Working for a boss is still alienating, even if pay is better and the hours are shorter. Many workers in the West remain trapped by a landlord class which extracts every dollar of value in rent which they can – a problem described in detail by Engels.²⁶⁴ Yet the

²⁶² In one telling recent example, the US executive branch intervened to prevent rail-workers from striking to gain paid time off and sick leave (Shepardson and Bose). Moreover, freight rail companies lobbied to prevent the implementation of new safety measures which could prevent disastrous derailment (Sirota et al.). On February 3rd 2023, a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, which caused a spill of toxic chemicals (Kim). Norfolk Southern reported 3rd quarter profits of \$3.4 billion dollars, representing \$4.04 of revenue per share for shareholders (Norfolk Southern 2022 3rd quarter financial report).

²⁶³ West, xiii

²⁶⁴ Engels, *The Housing Question*

desperation which forced the workers to unite in the 19th century was no longer as acute, and this led to the demobilization and deradicalization of the working class.

Sigmund Freud and the significance of critical theory

One important circle motivated by these questions was the Frankfurt School in Germany. This school emerged in the aftermath of the First World War, as German Marxists struggled to interpret the social conditions at the time. Initially founded with an influx of capital from Felix Weil and headed by Carl Grünberg, it became better known under the stewardship of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It ultimately settled on an interdisciplinary approach which combined traditional Marxist philosophy with psychoanalysis and other forms of social science.

The theory that cultural domination played a role in the deradicalization of the workers can be seen in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as in Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. The culture industry of the 20th century had new ways of reaching a now wealthier base of workers such as film and radio which greatly extended their reach, as well as novel new forms of marketing which often worked most efficiently when its effects remained at the level of the consumer's subconscious. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry gave capital the ability to produce a relatively uniform and predictable base of consumers who would reliably desire what the culture industry had to sell. Large corporations were incentivized to sell "art" to the lowest common denominator by satiating the consumer's desire to escape their conditions. This led to a body of culture which failed to challenge the viewers or lead them to question their social conditions. It was one thing when the bourgeois culture industry merely did this to other capitalists, but with their increased

purchasing power and free time, the workers themselves were increasingly subject to and manipulated by this output. Yet this wasn't uniformly seen as harmful by Frankfurt School thinkers – where Adorno and Horkheimer saw mainly danger in the culture industry, Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* argued that the culture industry's destruction of the "aura" of great art created opportunities for emancipation too.

Psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious gave the Frankfurt School new conceptual tools to understand human subjectivity. Of particular importance was the question of why workers elected to follow reactionary ideas such as antisemitism that offered illusory solutions to their problems over revolutionary approaches. The unconscious offered a mechanism to explain how these thoughts could have a hold over people which they were not even aware of, and which was difficult to disabuse them of through reason. For instance, Fromm reworked Freud's theory into a system of social psychoanalysis where personality types and their potential harms could be identified, and the causes of their existence identified. Moreover, socially therapeutic methods could potentially be identified that addressed pathological relations of dependence between personality types. This is perhaps best seen in Fromm's analysis of a village in Mexico, where he applied his theory to a traditional Ejido or *campesino* towns distinguished by its communal landownership. Fromm noted how the system of communal property, which was a product of indigenous land tenure as well as the reforms following the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, had become corrupted over time in the village he studied and was increasingly beset by inequalities. Alcoholism, various incentives to migrate, and an increasingly centralized consumer culture all contributed

to a sense of social alienation. These forms of alienation could be addressed through the appropriate interventions, although these interventions all presuppose the willingness of the participants for success.

The strength of Fromm's approach from a Marxist perspective is that it enriches the theory of social and historical development by identifying new mechanisms. It also requires that the theorist consider the standpoint of the population in question. For instance, regarding the relative illiteracy of the town he analyzed, Fromm argued that literacy provided few tangible benefits to peasants whose livelihood had been efficiently passed down across generations through folk knowledge. In this respect, it was complementary with Marx's original project instead of antagonistic. Though Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno often shied away from practical actions to address social problems and instead devoted themselves to theoretical issues, Fromm's approach facilitates a meaningful engagement with the communities most harmed by the current economic system.

The limits of internationalism

The role of institutional oppression, most notably racism and imperialism, inhibited the development of common projects and aspirations among the proletariat. Workers in the first world did not necessarily feel solidarity with the workers exploited in poorer countries and whose labor sustained their own consumption. In America, divisions between white and black workers inhibited the development of political movements unified around class (a problem acknowledged by Marx and Engels themselves). While political movements have been able to organize across racial and gendered divisions, national borders have posed an even greater challenge. The

exploitation of labor in the colonies allowed workers in more developed parts of the world to be better paid while still leaving room for profit – a problem only more notable today with globalized supply chains. Notably, this problematizes the claim that capitalism no longer entails the kind of misery described by Marx and Engels in 19th century England – while labor conditions in Western nations have improved drastically, the global economy still depends on sweatshop conditions and even forms of slavery and forced labor.

Despite the Crisis of Marxism in Western Europe and North America, these conditions produced many revolutionary movements across the colonial world. The Cold War saw a rapid process of decolonization, often led by movements which emerged from one Marxist tradition or another or were otherwise socialist. However, the process of decolonization was inhibited by the very maldevelopment which motivated these movements, as well as by their own political limitations. In Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, he argues that once liberation movements had emancipated themselves from *de jure* domination by foreign powers, these newly independent societies still had to deal with a backward industrial base, minimal infrastructure, a scarcity of skilled workers, a weaker position in the global economy, opposition from the most industrialized nations in the world, and an incompetent middle class.²⁶⁵ Moreover, he argues that the methods most familiar to the new governments were those of their former exploiters, which means similar forms of oppression and exploitation often re-emerged within their societies.

²⁶⁵ Fanon, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness"

The Philosophy of Liberation, which emerged out of Latin America, is a contemporary philosophical approach to the ethical and political struggles in the global south. It combines Marxist theory with liberation theology as well as phenomenology and postcolonialism. Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel is one preeminent thinker in this school, and in *Ethics of Liberation* he builds an ethical theory around the challenges of the oppressed. Like Fanon's application of Marx, Dussel's theory extends Marx's argument towards other groups such as the marginalized indigenous and African diasporic populations of the Americas whose oppression and exploitation cannot be explained without remainder by Marx's class analysis. These questions are not simply posed in terms of a subjective sense of identity but as objective systems of oppression which are brought to light by the critique of the victims. For Dussel, liberation is a transformative project for the victims of oppression where in organizing against their conditions, they gain collective political and social agency. Additionally, if we are attentive to such critiques and act in solidarity, we can change ourselves for the better alongside the victims. However, since oppression is so multifaceted, we cannot pursue universal liberation. Not only may new forms of oppression emerge in the future, but already-existing modes of oppression might be beyond the horizons of our standpoint. In this way, Dussel expands upon the acknowledgement by Marx and Engels that their moral standpoint is limited by their historical conditions. Consequently, we must retain an openness to new claims of victimhood and we must understand liberation as an ongoing process.

The domination of the workers and Antonio Gramsci's proletarian culture

As we saw, Weil, Braverman and others argue that the domination of the working class by their employer hinders their development. This domination takes place through increasing self-discipline among the workers, as well as through the discipline of their employers. This exposes a troubling question in Marx's ethics – if labor produces the subject, and if human nature is so malleable that subjects can be restructured in so many ways, then can the capitalist class produce a kind of worker who at worst is unable to recognize their true interests and is at best unable to organize to realize those interests? Lukacs and Adorno express similar worries. For Lukacs, this is a problem only among those who work in certain professions such as journalism where the worker must become an effective mouthpiece of bourgeois ideology:

The specialised 'virtuoso', the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties does not just become the [passive] observer of society; he also lapses into a contemplative attitude vis-a-vis the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties. (It is not possible here even to outline the way in which modern administration and law assume the characteristics of the factory as we noted above rather than those of the handicrafts.) This phenomenon can be seen at its most grotesque in journalism. Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament, and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their 'owner' and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand. The journalist's 'lack of convictions', the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification. (Lukács, 100)

Yet Adorno worries that this is has become a norm which extends to the wider society, including the working class:

What was here noted among 'the degenerate manifestations' of the bourgeoisie, which it still itself denounced, has since emerged as the social norm, as the character of irreproachable existence under late industrialism. It has long ceased to be a matter of the mere sale of the living. Under *a priori* saleability the living thing has made itself, as something living, a thing, equipment. The ego consciously takes the whole man into its service as a

piece of apparatus. In this re-organization the ego as business-manager delegates so much of itself to the ego as business-mechanism, that it becomes quite abstract, a mere reference-point: self-preservation forfeits its self. Character traits, from genuine kindness to the hysterical fit of rage, become capable of manipulation, until they coincide exactly with the demands of a given situation. With their mobilization they change. All that is left are the light, rigid, empty husks of emotions, matter transportable at will, devoid of anything personal. (Adorno, 230)

This problem compounds the crisis of Marxism, as it suggests the workers – the only class which can emancipate all classes – is increasingly becoming unable to effectively emancipate itself.

Marcuse's solution to this challenge was to reach out to students and those disproportionately working-class ethnic minorities whose subaltern status prevents them from being fully co-opted in this manner. His approach left its mark on the New Left and its increasing focus on the academy as a site of struggle. The stark difference in approach with Adorno's pessimism is revealed in Marcuse's exchange of letters with Adorno at the end of Adorno's life.²⁶⁶ Adorno, facing protests from students who objected to his pessimistic quietism, had cancelled his classes and was profoundly upset by the radicalism of the students. For Adorno, the radicalism was histrionic, and reminded him of the fanaticism of the fascists he fled in the 1930s. Marcuse defended the students against Adorno's accusations of "left fascism" and was optimistic about the increasing militancy of educated students.

Perhaps the most orthodox Marxist theory to address the problems of modern domination is not found in Critical Theory but in the works of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Writing from prison under Mussolini's fascist government, Gramsci

²⁶⁶ Leslie, "Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence"

built upon the theories of class morality articulated by Marx and Engels through his notion of proletarian culture. Proletarian culture was emerging under the hegemony of bourgeois culture, which meant it was still not entirely free from the domination of the ruling class. Proletarian culture has its own norms and aspirations distinct from the bourgeoisie, but its development is still constrained by the hegemony of the other class. It must develop its own autonomous values and social institutions wherein its own values and virtues can flower. Gramsci deals with some of the problem identified by Weil and Braverman in his short essay “Americanism and Fordism”. For Gramsci, it was not enough to simply identify the problematic cultural forces of bourgeois morality and condemn them:

In America, rationalization and prohibition are undoubtedly related: inquiries by industrialists into the private lives of workers and the inspection services created by some industrialists to control the “morality” of workers are necessities of the new method of work. Those who deride the initiatives and see them merely as a hypocritical manifestation of “puritanism” will never be able to understand the importance, the significance, and the *objective import* of the American phenomenon, which is *also* the biggest collective effort ... to create, with unprecedented speed and a consciousness of purpose unique in history, a new type of worker and of man. (Gramsci, 215)

The significance of bourgeois moralism, for Gramsci, is in its production of a certain kind of subject – the productive employee. Gramsci notes that the effort to turn the worker into a “trained gorilla” was not new but merely the continuation of a process which began with industrialization itself.²⁶⁷ For Gramsci, these changes did not exclude the possibility of proletarian development so much as altered the strategic landscape. Though Fordism represented new modes of domination, it still contained its own contradictions which undermine its sustainability and create opportunities for the

²⁶⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 216

working class to recognize the real nature of the economy. Echoing Marx's words on the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, Gramsci describes how bourgeois morality in America increasingly diverges from the moral demands it makes of the American proletariat. Such contradictions can serve to undermine the hold of bourgeois hegemony over the working class. Moreover, the mechanization of American workers does not lead inexorably to their total subsumption within bourgeois culture. Even in the worst conditions, they still retain their faculties. For instance, Gramsci notes how workers engaging in simple tasks have more time and freedom to think on their own as they no longer need to invest their thought into their labor:

Once the process of adaptation has been completed, the brain of the worker, in reality, does not become mummified but rather reaches a state of complete freedom. Physical movement becomes totally mechanical, the memory of the skill, reduced to simple gestures repeated with rhythmic intensity, "makes its home" inside the bundles of muscles and nerves, leaving the brain free for other occupations. One walks without having to reflect on all the movements that are needed to move one's legs and one's whole body in the specific way that walking requires the same thing has become true for the basic movements of work. One walks and thinks about whatever one wishes ... Not only does he think, but the lack of direct satisfaction from work and the fact that, as a worker, he has been reduced to a trained gorilla can lead him to a train of thought that is far from conformist. (Gramsci, 219)

This does not guarantee that these workers will use that opportunity, but it does mean that they can still develop consciousness. If those trying to organize the proletariat could exploit features like these, then proletarian culture could continue to develop and flourish.

Conclusion

As we saw, Marx and Engels acknowledge the fundamental incompleteness of their own understanding of ethics and the proletarian standpoint. The moral questions

their theories raised must be reconsidered in the light of later developments, and the historical dialectic underpinning its changes needs to be exposed. Moreover, new developments in the sciences such as psychology and sociology need to be considered. Finally, the postcolonial and feminist critiques have shown the need for a richer understanding of how class intersects with other forms of marginalization. Further research on how 20th century thinkers like Beauvoir, Fanon, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, Dussel and Gramsci not only use Marx's ideas but update them can enrich our picture of the Marxist approach to ethics. We need to carry these critiques over into the 21st century. What is the significance of the internet for the culture industry in shaping subjects? How might workers form relationships of solidarity across national divides in the face of global supply chains? How do companies try in various ways to habituate and manipulate workers in new sectors like social media or precarious employees in the gig economy, and in what ways is this habituation harmful to workers? How ought movements committed to the advancement of the working class relate to indigenous movements or women's movements?

Though the conditions of class exploitation have changed drastically since Marx's time, workers continue to be alienated and exploited in their place of work. Moreover, we live in a society where working-class people continue to fall prey to exploitative landlords, financial scams, and politicians who only have a performative concern for their wellbeing. Consequently, we cannot ignore Marx's critique of our current society despite the events of the 20th century. On one hand, Marx challenges us as readers of his theoretical works to confront these facts, but he is also challenging the working class to do something about it to alleviate not only their own conditions but to better humanity

as a whole. The point, after all, is to change the world. This is an ethos easily recognized in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, where it is the worker who has the opportunity to master their objective conditions and therefore the means to change their world. However, when we turn our attention to the worker and the question of what they ought to do, it also begins to resemble Aristotle's theory of virtue, as the question becomes how the subject ought to change themselves if they are to obtain their emancipation. Who ought the worker to make themselves into, and in the process of changing the world, who will the worker become? What kinds of subjects ought the working class strive to be? What virtues have the workers already won? These are the central questions motivating the sparse words Marx and Engels left on ethics. These questions are significant so long as we do not consider the current social organization to be the only or the most natural way of organizing society, and if we do not privilege the virtues of the wealthy or successful above all others.

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